

## Chapter 6. Teaching for Transformation

Writing educators must challenge the public perception of writing, so argued Linda Adler-Kassner in her 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) chair's address ("Because Writing"). As we noted in Chapter 1, she targeted the impoverished perception of what writing does as a force that shapes not only communication but also learning, identity, ideology, ideas and change. But she saved her well-documented attack for the economically motivated re-definition of instruction as a fast and narrow chute to a job which contributes to the economy. This route to "the profitable moment" (326) has no place for embodiment or encounters with uncertainty, conflict, or contradiction, what she calls "troublesomeness." This reductive view has in turn spawned a tidy set of criteria which identify and calculate achievement with a measurable set of competencies designed for workplace success (322).

Like the "crisis in the humanities," this battle is being fought in operational terms over how we define and measure learning. When the very term *measure* replaces the goal of showing *evidence* of learning, we have reduced its more complex, ultimately more essential, outcomes to what is easy or convenient to count.

So one motivation for this research has been to explore ways to discover, document, and more publicly represent some of the significant and distinctive outcomes of community-engaged education. And on that foundation to advocate for the privilege of teaching at the intersection of rhetorical theory, research, and social experience that supports a fully engaged education. Yet as Adler-Kassner suggested, the problem is that we haven't effectively challenged the mindset and methods of *measurement* with an alternative art of documenting and publicly representing critical outcomes that reach beyond the classroom.

Working in that direction, one of the success stories of the past decade has been discovering ways to rethink the meaning of and ways to teach for transfer. At the same time, as we saw in Chapter 1, transfer is a very contextually attuned practice. And being aware of that is critical to effective teaching (Roderick). Teaching, that would support not only transfer but the *transformation* of knowledge, sets the stakes even higher. Upon encountering a new rhetorical situation, writers need to realize that their prior knowledge will need to adapt to a social interaction, that learned practices are subject to revision, and that the writer's identity is on view. Moreover, as educators we know there is no "best" way to do that—to prepare students to enter a social/cognitive/affective event in which, as Dana Cloud would say, "reality bites." Given the polymorphous nature of engaged education, I expect each of us has worked toward some version of these goals in our own circumstances.

I want to be clear that the case studies sketched in this book are not an argument for a particular curriculum. However, I do believe, that in combination the

approaches explored here, point to two conceptual frameworks that can support more fully engaged learning. They do this work by posing useful questions we can ask of a course or project. One framework building on activity theory would ask: *how are we helping students engage with their project's larger activity system* by asking:

- First, are we reading a situation to uncover its Contradictions (where practices, ideas or values come in conflict in order to discover in them openings for Change?)
- Then, how are we Collaborating within a Contact Zone across different perspectives, experiences, values? Are we partners in Inquiry or is difference an obstacle to be overcome?

A second framework would ask: how can we help students work as grounded-theory builders by asking ourselves:

- How might I adapt the process of Grounded-Theory Building to students' learning?
- Researchers use the powerful moves of Grounded-Theory Building to develop a normative theory. But can students use these moves to build a more contingent and adaptable Working Theory?
- And am I teaching Theory Building directly? Are my students translating theory into action guided by a new Metacognitive Awareness of their choices, decisions, and outcomes?
- Finally, the path to transformed and transformative learning will lie not in what we teach, but in what students do. The Grounded-Theory Guide which concludes this chapter invites students themselves to reflect on their own theory-informed process of engagement, and to articulate where have they had the most success and where the hurdles lie.

## Engaging with a Larger Activity System.

Students in an engaged course may quickly realize they are entering some sort of educational adventure, but they may not recognize the complexity of reading and writing that is at stake in this new social/cultural/historical activity system, such as Yrjö Engeström describes ("Developmental Studies"). The course itself is an activity system: 1) working within the traditions of education, the university, the program, as well as the local norms of a community culture; 2) using mediating tools, including lectures, papers, grades, discussions, joint planning sessions, written guides and even local dialects; 3) operating with divisions of labor among students, teachers, TAs, program chairs, advisors, community organization staff and participants, each with their own role and place in the division of labor, hierarchy, and power structure. Among all those active forces they need to consider which ones are making a difference. And finally, how do students represent

*themselves*, as well as the unvoiced contradictions, all within the larger activity system that their socially engaged class has entered? How does our course turn activity theory into a new way of seeing?

The practice of “early uptake” (see Chapter 3, Case 1) is a clear example of re-seeing which worked to understand the needs of Phoenix’s South Sudanese immigrant women—before automatically sending them to one of the community’s standard “literacy” classes (Long, *Responsive*). That means, before opting for a ready-made solution to what leadership theorist Ronald Heifetz calls a “technical problem,” we are choosing to face a more demanding “adaptive” one. Recognizing the failure of many programs to be genuinely useful, this practice of “early uptake” started with listening and participating in order to understand the highly gendered economic and social power structures of the Sudanese diaspora community. Coming to grips with this complex and unfamiliar activity system uncovered some of its critical contradictions, such as an immigrant culture in which women have to be both primary breadwinners *as well as* family/home managers. This early uptake saw the striking incongruity between the genre-based assignments of the university’s literacy outreach classes and the women’s real uses for literacy as both personal sensemaking and advocacy. For educators to self-consciously grasp, much less play a role in, this activity system called for new tools, such as active observation or engaging in multi-voiced collaborative planning. As described by Elenore Long, Jennifer Clifton, and their associate Roda Nyapuot Kuek, this led to inventing a “positional mapping” practice that traced the “cultural flows” in this South Sudanese community, which, in effect, determined the expectations placed on these women (Long, *Responsive* 185-216). Working with this larger picture, their “responsive rhetorical art” had reverberations throughout its wider activity system.

A school-sponsored representation of a service or a course such as this is often built around what we are already prepared to do—what Heifetz would call managing that “technical problem” (8). To think beyond requires not only dipping your toes in an experience but thoughtful critical analysis, guided by powerful conceptual frameworks, such as activity theory or frame analysis. It is this ability to step back from the context provided in a college course and use its strategies to construct an equally complex but different representation of engagement—a transformation that occurs at the level of a social, cognitive, cultural and historical activity system itself.

## Reading a Rhetorical Situation: Analyzing an Activity

A good place to engage this way of seeing is to analyze with your students the *rhetorical situation* they are entering—which is likely to be a particularly dynamic one. In the famous Bitzer/Vatz debate over this concept, Lloyd Bitzer’s rhetor needs first to grasp the exigence, “an imperfection marked by urgency” (qtd. in Vatz 156). That is, to ask what stands behind this need to speak or write, right now

(especially when it is not a mere assignment), which is linked to the nature of the audience and the constraints surrounding this situation? Richard Vatz's rhetor, however, also needs to recognize that the situation is created by what we choose to pay attention to and the interpretative act that translates it into meaning (157).

In "Political Rhetoric" Bitzer speaks even more directly to what the student must deal with, given some sort of evolving exigence an engaged course is likely to enter. Rhetorical concerns, then, are mainly probable, contingent, interest-laden, and frequently in contention. These characteristics mark the central realm of activity for rhetoric, which is the practical world of human affairs. Here rhetoric labors between the challenge and the fitting response, the imperfection and the remedy, the crisis and the calm. This, Kenneth Burke colorfully remarked, "is the area of the human barnyard—the big scramble" (qtd. in Bitzer, "Political Rhetoric" 8).

Has my class led students beyond acquiring a useful transferable genre, such as proposal writing or a public statement, into practicing the transformative art of probing, analyzing, interpreting, responding to the real rhetorical situation? (And are they also realizing that "real" is only a heuristic, an interpretive fiction we create in order to act?) Do they see their response to this situation as a step in Dewey's "experimental" way of knowing (*Quest* 132)? Not satisfied with comfortable or easy answers, our "knowing" is simply a current best hypothesis subject to the test of reality. This last point is perhaps essential to a meaningfully transformed application of learning: my classes and their expectations are over in 14 weeks—socially engaged situations tend to call for re-reading and reentering the fray.<sup>1</sup>

Conventional or narrowed readings of the rhetorical situation have consequences. David Coogan's well-supported argument for a materialist rhetoric described a dramatic, revealing failure when his class plunged into a campaign for neglected local public schools, publicly naming the problem as the need for "local control" (672). They read the situation as a familiar political advocacy call for neighborhood representation on local school boards. Unfortunately, they failed to uncover the politics of "local control" or share the residents' history with that agenda, which had merely resulted in surface policy changes soon co-opted by Chicago's city council.

His class had entered a larger system that included a history and a set of

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1. In an intriguing case in point, Dr. Wayne Peck, director of Pittsburgh's Community House, trained two groups of community literacy interns to write an argument to the City Council advocating for a caring response to hunger in the inner city. One practiced the text-based strategies of Toulmin's data-warrant-claim scheme for argument. The other focused on a rhetorical representation of the participants and their goals—assessing values, attitudes, and beliefs and learning to strategically address the rhetorical complexity and social dynamics of the situation. Independent judges found that although the text-based instruction produced the best organized letters, they also agreed that they were unlikely to have any effect on the city council. It took the rhetorical/social instruction to create persuasive and powerful advocacy.

rhetorical tools wielded by powerful institutions—such as the trick of assigning public titles and meaningless roles to citizens within an institutional structure. But in a subsequent—successful—attempt at community organizing for schools, Coogan drew on the more powerful tool of ideographic analysis, shifting his focus from political legislation to calling parents, students, and teachers to take “local responsibility” on themselves. Opening their eyes to the larger activity system and its contradictions led to redefining the problem, revising their rhetoric, and in some meaningful ways, rewriting the situation. It also worked.

Frame analysis is another powerful tool, especially when two frames are competing for turf in our activity. For instance, you may think of hunger with the standard “individualist” frame that tends to guide policy and the action of many non-profit “food-recovery” groups, where volunteers transport grocery stores’ outdated surplus to local food banks. However, when Alex Helberg compared just this sort of non-profit, Pittsburgh’s 412 Food Rescue, with another anti-hunger organization, he found them to be “vying for political hegemony” within the city, working from what he described as two radically different, competing “political imaginaries.” (See also Chapter 4) Food Not Bombs, a local member of the anarchist movement, is a direct-action activist group. Its public potlucks are designed not only to raise awareness of and combat local hunger and food insecurity, but also to double as attention-getting political demonstrations.

412 Food Rescue’s framework was designed to solve the “emergency” problem of hunger with methods of “food recovery,” whereas Food Not Bombs attacks the individualist framing that dominates the broader political rhetoric. Hunger, they assert, is a large-scale societal problem (Helberg 7-8). The hungry people in Pittsburgh are evidence not of an *individualist* problem but a large-scale, societal, *systemic* problem.

So what can follow from an activity analysis of complex situations like these? As educators, we are good at giving students tools for different kinds of analysis (cultural, discourse, feminist, etc.), for making critical appraisals of rhetorical situations, and for constructing well-formed arguments in appropriate genres. Good analysis, however, is only a precursor to action.<sup>2</sup> In the case of community

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2. In a challenging comparison of a high-stake formal education versus on-the-ground engaged learning, consider the forms of “non-traditional education” that go on in urban neighborhoods in crisis—in churches, Black newspapers, and community groups. This sort of engaged education comes to life when Derek Handley takes us into the historical and rhetorical resistance of three Black urban communities (Pittsburgh, St Paul, and Milwaukee) facing destructive “urban renewal” in the 1950s and 60s. His study shows us what a rhetorical education for community action had to accomplish. The leadership seminars in Milwaukee that sprang up had no small task: “to (develop) in students a communal and civic identity and [a program that] articulates the rhetorical strategies, language practices, and bodily and social behaviors that make possible their participation in communal and civic affairs” (Enoch 8-9, qtd. in Handley 106).

These seminars offer an exceptional model for engaged education within a community.

engagement, one of the real challenges is becoming collaborative partners across difference—and to not only overcome but to, in fact, put that difference to use (Flower, “Difference-Driven Inquiry”).

## Collaboration in a Contact Zone: Entering an Activity

As an engaged educator, the next question I would ask myself here is, how am I helping my student go beyond the *experience* of difference, as powerful as that may be, to interacting with self-awareness within a *contact zone*? An influential article by Louise Pratt back in 1991 defined contact zones as “spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today” (qtd. in Harris 31). However, as Joseph Harris argues, when Pratt’s idea moves to the classroom, “many students have chosen to view the contact zone as a kind multicultural bazaar [defined by the voices on its reading list] which are not so much brought into conflict with opposing views as placed in a kind of harmless connection with a series of exotic others” (33). On the other hand, as Harris notes, faculty meetings also engage in the “wrangle of competing interests and views,” and their model of interaction is equally problematic as “exchanges quickly devolved into a kind of position-taking, as the competing factions on both sides of the issue soon retreated back to and defended the very arguments they had entered the debate with” (35).

Though remaining rather understandably silent on the reform of faculty meetings, the alternative classroom Harris proposes is a contact zone in which students “negotiate the gaps and conflicts between several competing discourses” (31). He builds a case for just such “negotiation” that asks students to articulate and work through the differences they perceive among themselves as they discuss books or events (32). When, however, engaged courses move out of the designer space of a classroom, that zone is even less likely to be limited to general issues raised by race, gender, and status, or multicultural social theory. As Long’s activity analysis showed, outside of the classroom students will be acting within the broader space of a rhetorical situation set in a social, institutional, and community setting.

The question then becomes, what happens when those students walk into a collaborative contact zone within the wider activity of engaged education? What

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In practice, Handley documents, they “empower(d) citizens with the knowledge of how the local government worked and the rhetorical skills necessary for leadership in their community. . . . creat(ing) the conditions for distributed agency in the fight against urban renewal and restricted housing. . . . By providing a safe space for residents to take control over their own circumstances. . . . [they] also helped residents establish relationships with other organizations and individuals outside the community” ( 117). The obvious question follows: how do our courses stack up?

if, as we saw in Chapter 3, their activity analysis must be attuned to a larger institutional system like a university, or their rhetorical analysis may have to deal with the current relationship between community members and their organizations? What if that “attunement” calls for drawing campus organizations, one’s own professors, and college administrators into a new, deliberative public? And given that institution’s norms, expectations, or rules for promotion, what does an activity analysis mean for an instructor—an untenured assistant professor teaching a 4/4 who chooses the special demands and extra work of an engaged course? Here, the rhetorical situation for students and teachers isn’t satisfied with a wrangle over contradictions but calls for a probing rhetorical analysis of how to face those contradictions, go beyond mere advocacy, and make a difference. Moreover, it may need to put this collaborative inquiry into writing *and* into circulation—to create a public that pays attention.

Learning to negotiate such situations will require not just the transfer of writing skills but expansive and collaborative transformations. Even in familiar writing projects, the mentor and writer may be separated by not only race or class but peoples’ aspirations and options for achieving them. And as we saw with the Decision Makers writers in Chapter 3, the personal relations between Scholar and Mentor were essential to putting concerns, uncertainty, limitations down on paper together, whether the issue was as public as a curfew policy or as personal as the experience of risk and respect. But the collaborative hill to climb isn’t just letting someone be heard but helping them take on a new, demanding literate practice, by choice. This creates a challenging contact zone for both parties. Mentors must create a mutual awareness with their scholar that they are swimming up this new river together. And that may require taking on a literate practice not merely as a means to self-expression but putting writing to use in an unfamiliar civic context to call into being a new local public with one’s words. In the Think Tank cases we observed in Chapters 2 and 3, literate practices such as collaborative planning and rivaling supported live interactions and drew writers into creating negotiated meanings. At the same time, I would say, collaboration was equally motivated and shaped by the looming presence of a live public performance before peers and strangers, coupled with the affirming prospect and intimidating expectations of an actual published, public text. This mix birthed a self-conscious recognition of being in a contact zone, of the value of difference, and of the need for negotiated understanding. Learning outcomes like these depend on immersing students as actors in the multiple dimensions of a live rhetorical problem and its space.

More generally, these complex contact zones showcase the way engaged education asks students to draw on rich conceptual frameworks for thinking about difference, conflict and difficult questions and to then put their current working hypothesis for negotiating them to the test of experience. When that powerful mix is coupled with metacognitive awareness of what you did, students are prepared to transform *this* learning in order to enter new, distinctive, and dynamic problem spaces.

## Becoming a Grounded-Theory Builder

Just as choosing to analyze a rhetorical situation as an activity can broaden one's outward facing inquiry, grounded-theory building can heighten attunement to our own interpretations and actions. Working with this framework, students can begin to see themselves as agents with the power to translate their combination of course-based conceptual tools and experiential observation into a working theory—a hypothesis for action, rooted in and waiting to be tested by experience. For us, this means adapting the researcher's method of "grounded-practical-theory building" into a teachable practice designed for students.

### The Nature of Grounded-Practical-Theory Building (GTB)

In their studies of "intellectual discussion in academic institutions," Robert Craig and Karen Tracy have translated grounded-theory building from sociology into a window on communication (248). They have given us a research method designed not only to describe but, as they argue, to build a *normative* theory which speaks directly to *practice*. Unlike an empirical description of what happened, its goal is a more prescriptive understanding, not unlike the ethical wisdom of Aristotle's *phronesis*. But here is the rub, as Craig and Tracy point out, theories "developed largely through philosophical speculation may be difficult to operationalize in practice or have little relevance to the problems and choices that practitioners typically experience" (250). The alternative, central to John Dewey's philosophical pragmatism as well, "envisions critical reflection not as a purely philosophical exercise external to practice, but as a process of inquiry that arises within practical situations in response to practical problems" (253). In grounded-practical-theory building, this means starting your inquiry at the ground level with people and situations—and then ferreting out, probing, and naming the problem that calls or spurs you to inquiry. Craig and Tracy call researchers to work toward a *normative* theory. However, I will suggest, when the "researchers" are students conducting their own engaged inquiry, we will want to adapt this powerful process to their lived contexts. Here, the goal of grounded-theory building will be better described as a hypothesis—a form of knowing open to experience I would call a "working theory."

### Naming the Problem

In advocacy work, the problem may be readily apparent, as in contradictions between what a community or its students need and what its institutions are tooled up to provide. But as Heifetz' leadership cases show, our initial or a partisan assessment may not discern the deeper, less obvious problem, especially when that problem would require us to examine or even alter our own assumptions and predispositions (e.g., as we saw in the Community Think Tank featured in Chapter 3: aren't the difficulties of these "Independent" students' merely a matter of



self-reliance or perhaps merely the indication of low effort?). As the writers in the hidden frames study of Chapter 4 revealed, the real problem may even be our own unrecognized marginalizing frames or image of our roles. In another example, Craig and Tracy's discourse analysis of troubled faculty communication practices revealed an ongoing conflict between their "situated ideals" or "inchoate normative principles" and the very techniques faculty relied on to address tensions that framed the problem (250). For instance, consider the difference between coming to a decision in an unstructured, opinion-airing faculty meeting or in a deliberative, problem-focused, problem-solving think tank roundtable. They go on to argue that the real function of a normative ideal may be to work as a counterfactual model used for "critically reflecting on practice that necessarily deviates from [this] norm"—that is, the ideal norm you are proposing (253). Yet it is important to note how in all these cases, actually naming the problem your theory would address can require research and extended critical inquiry.

### The Work of Interpretation

Naming the problem is the initial step in the extended process of building a theory, which Paulo Freire describes as praxis or action/reflection. In a problem-oriented class, this might begin with reading, observation, and discussion as inquiry moves in a hermeneutic circle of pre-interpretation, action, critical reflection, reinterpretation, and further action. "Theory' (conceptual thought) and 'practice' (situated action) can be understood as moments within this process" (Craig and Tracy 252).

In Aristotle's account, praxis is a way to create practical knowledge or wisdom, phronesis. Because this good judgment is often realized in situations of choice or deliberation, he highlights the role rhetorical skill or *techné* plays in the process of discovery. Likewise, in Craig and Tracy's account of building a normative model of communication, it takes both rhetorical insight and interaction to build a "rational reconstruction of practice" (248) that is both useful and a "morally and politically significant social practice" (252). The construction of a situated, useful normative theory of communication problems, they note, is most likely to emerge in the interactive discussions we see in "brown bags, seminars and colloquia and in arguments directed to educators, analysts, organizers" (255). How, then, shall we draw students in an engaged course beyond mere participation into this powerful work of interpretation?

For this purpose, grounded-theory building (GTB) offers a set of distinctive moves. It starts not with a topic or much less a claim but with intentional engagement with a problem, a conflict, or a contradiction. And instead of turning to prior theory or received wisdom, it initiates a problem analysis based on close observation. It probes not only the context but looks in particular for the strategies, practices, or techniques at play in this communication problem. Here is where GTB goes beyond standard research, as it seeks to construct an *ideal* or *normative practice*. The aim is practical wisdom, praxis, action. But there is one more twist in the road,

because the ideals articulated in a *grounded*-practical theory must necessarily be *situated ideals*. They are not generalized, abstract principles but a reconstruction from the data of observation. What they offer is a “reasoned basis for the resolution of pragmatic dilemmas” (Craig and Tracy 259). Should we do X or Y?

In Craig and Tracy’s framework, researchers are the agents and other faculty are the audience. Our task is to adapt it for students in community-engaged classes in which the challenge is not for educators to create grounded theories (unless it is about better teaching) but to offer students a new power tool for transforming their own knowledge guided by a metacognitive awareness of *themselves* as grounded-theory builders. The change would start with a role reversal in which the students are the researchers to whom we lend support. One approach to adapting comes out of a comparison Craig and Tracy make to other research. In one comment, they note many parallels to the early research John R. Hayes and I did on the cognitive processes of writers, particularly its focus on problems and close observation. Then, as they point out, since that research doesn’t try to construct a normative goal, it offers no implications for action.

However, I would argue, a more accurate distinction, especially relevant to teaching, is that those writing studies were motivated by two complementary disciplinary goals. One was to build a data-based descriptive model of a cognitive process—a key move in cognitive psychology (Hayes). The other, however, was to use the observed differences between expert and novice writers as a guide to identifying and teaching some of the rhetorical problem-solving strategies on which experienced writers draw (Flower, *Problem-Solving*). In this sense, we were indeed reconstructing *these* observations into situated ideals. However, there is another important difference. Unlike a *normative* theory, such strategies are always heuristics—working hypotheses, merely high-probability moves, designed to give students a new awareness and conscious control of their own strategic choices. So the next step in our educational research, I would suggest, is to discover how best to teach this sort of strategic knowledge by observing what learners actually do with it in practice. In place of a normative theory, we would be working for a situated hypothesis subject to being tested and developed by experience.

## Teaching Theory Builders

Let us consider an example of a student theory builder trying to make sense of a no doubt familiar intercultural encounter in a community literacy project. Keith, a white college mentor, wanted to understand what he called “productive frictions” within “circuits of power.” He was also trying to minimize his power position in his relationship with Chandra, an African American teenager (often amused at his politicized reading of her day-to-day life). At the same time, he was trying to push her to rigorous thinking and to entice her to interrogate her own assumptions, just as he, a cultural studies student, did. Yet how did Chandra construe this experience and interpret its meaning? For his final paper, Keith was

trying to build a scaffold for teaching about power relations. After documenting all the instances of the often-subtle shifts in power he observed between teens, mentors, and adults, his grounded theory was still trying to balance both the fluidity of the power dynamics at the CLC with one of his own “foiled attempts” to shift them. Connecting theory to the world of practice can be difficult.

A comparison with his graduate student mentor-coordinator will demonstrate a more extended practice of theory building that entertains even more demanding goals. Starting with a tool I have described as “observation-based theory building,” this way of conducting research in writing and reading combines the tools of educational research with the agenda of feminist science. As Donna Haraway describes the goal of research: “Feminists have to insist on a project . . . that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of the world, in order to live in it well (Haraway, qtd. in Flower, “Observation” 167).

But Haraway’s agenda also adds two additionally rigorous demands. The first is an ethical stance to conduct this inquiry “in critical reflexive relation to our own as well as others’ practices of domination and the unequal part of privilege and oppression that make up all positions” (167). The second is an epistemological stance which recognizes that, since all knowledge is situated knowledge, alternative explanations can co-exist. Yet at the same time, this agenda seeks to build “no-nonsense commitments to faithful accounts of the ‘real world’” that go beyond critique—to develop what Donna Haraway would call “feminist objectivity.” As Sandra Harding puts it, in the place of making personal position statements much less Truth claims, we are engaged in the rhetorical process of case building in order to offer “reliable grounds for deciding just which claims to knowledge are preferable” (qtd. in Flower, “Observation” 167).

Here our theory builder Elenore Long (clearly not just any mentor) was using her dissertation to build just such a “case” by asking, “how do we negotiate intercultural images of literacy?” In a preview of work to come, her observation-based theory building, like grounded theory, had started with probing and analyzing this problem, observing on many levels, and recording multiple kinds of data. And with this observational grounding, she began to forge links with academic reading, research, and her own intuitions and hypotheses, drawing on conceptual tools ranging from close analysis, to articulating rival hypotheses, to submitting her coding to reliability checks and tests of probability. All of which led her back in turn to the data and new possibilities. In short, she was building a researcher’s negotiated meaning (Long “The Rhetoric”).<sup>3</sup> As an observation-based theory builder, she was working, on the one hand, to create “a meaningful *interpretation* of the

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3. Long’s study, initially subtitled “The Rhetoric of Social Action: College Mentors Negotiating Intercultural Images of Literacy” appeared in 2000 in *Inventing a Discipline* (edited by Maureen Goggin) which traces the formative years of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline. What stands out there is the way *teaching* writing was the dynamic force in the discipline’s new theory building.

world; and, on the other, to *test that constructed reality* in clear and careful ways against the rich and contrary data of experience” (Flower, “Observation” 183).<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that as a graduate student, Elenore Long was acutely aware of herself as a grounded-theory builder, aware of her methods, and the unknowns she was working with. Examples of the transformative work that followed have turned up in previous chapters. But what would it take for an *undergraduate* mentor to see this sequence of reading, contact, discussion and writing as pieces of the frame in their own process of building (rebuilding) a grounded theory? How could a socially engaged course make them aware of their own agency, taking them beyond a mere response, into an ongoing process of critical interpretation, to be tested by experience, then shaped and even transformed in the face of new problems that emerge (that will perhaps call for new grounded working theories)? Moreover, how do you lay a foundation for the even more independent work of transformation? Based on these case studies (as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3) I will argue that one of the most powerful underlying forces that both instigates and guides transformation is a student’s metacognitive awareness of what they have learned and its significance. Such awareness develops naturally over time, but let us consider what we mean by the term and how our teaching might set this in motion.

### The Nature of Metacognitive Awareness

Imagine for a moment the understanding your own metacognitive awareness might create in a situation like this. Chad, a Pittsburgh urban teenager, had just written a forceful argument against his school’s ineffectual suspension practice, with lively interpolated street language for effect, which would soon be published in one of the Community Literacy Center’s widely circulated newsletters. His teacher comes up to you at the public Community Conversation where the teenagers are presenting their writing and dramatizing their ideas. In an annoyed, dismissive tone, she informs you, “You are undoing all my work—telling him that he can *write!*” How should you respond? Suppressing your immediate (quite undiplomatic reaction), you take a mental step back to ask yourself: How should I even interpret this interaction? What is the *real* problem here? What would the probable effects of alternative emotional, rational, or inquiring responses be? And perhaps later, as you engage in metacognitive reflection on your own thoughts: Why did I respond the way I did? Does this information have any implications for my mentoring, teaching, interaction with the schools? How would you respond? To what purpose?

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4. I would also like to note that the paper quoted here carried a footnote thanking a number of colleagues whose ideas and voices helped make it. What should be added to its account of observation-based theory building goes beyond mere appreciation of these valued individuals to a more sophisticated understanding of the highly significant, constructive role a whole network of colleagues plays in shaping and improving any attempt at theory building. An omission I would like to rectify if I could. Research is a highly collaborative experience.

“Metacognition” like “transfer” is a promiscuous term used for different activities and multiple levels of consciousness as noted in Chapter 5. In the research on the regulation of learning, its multiple facets include various metacognitive acts, from responses at the level of unconscious processing to conscious deliberation and the regulation of cognition. The unconscious activity kicks in, for instance, when comprehension of a sentence stumbles and a reader automatically goes back to reread the problematic sentence. But at the level of conscious observation and reflection, the reader may pause to ask, “Why is this confusing?” Or the reader may draw on a strategy, like recalling the context; or may consider a plan to solve the dilemma, such as asking in class; or may go so far as to notice how their own speed-reading practice may not be working so well here. And some readers may make the even more demanding cognitive move of drawing a connecting inference or venturing an explanation for this experience (e.g., *is this problem with me or something about this text?*). The examples of transformation in this book are chosen to reflect this higher-level metacognitive work. As we saw in the cases, metacognition might take the form of a focused memory search, probing one’s thinking, assumptions, and experiences; and it can even rise to articulating not only remembered events, but the feelings and judgments they engendered. As in my encounter with that high school teacher, this can allow a more revealing comparison of one’s initial cognitive and affective response to one’s own current interpretation. Metacognition can stage an internal mental drama.

In rhetoric and composition, we assign reflection for many purposes, from prompting a review of assigned readings to revising one’s own writing. For our purposes, I wish to focus on a distinctive form of reflection designed to support that higher level of metacognitive awareness that feeds and invites transformation. Given that engaged education, by its very nature, seeks to adapt to its setting, I cannot presume to offer the practices, much less curriculum, that might be best for yours. For example, prompting such reflection is itself a very opportunistic move: it can happen in a conversation walking down the hall, in a debriefing, or in dedicated class discussions on the formal assignments as described in Chapter 5. More importantly, although this book does offer descriptions of some practices I and others have worked with, that may or may not be suited to your goals. However, we can look at our own assignments, practices, and goals to gauge how directly they support students’ own awareness. And to note how we do it: through invitation, modeling, scaffolding . . . ?

### Three Tests for Teaching Metacognitive Awareness

Like activity analysis, grounded-theory building is a rhetorical theory *and* a practice we are likely to be good at teaching, focused as it is on observing, naming and interpreting a live and present problem. Metacognition is the next step to actually *becoming* a theory builder. However, this power tool is a highly individual, internal action—a form of awareness that is hard to model or observe. So I would like

to conclude this chapter, first by sketching a set of tests teachers can use to ask: do I see any evidence that my students are building bridges, seeing applications, and making change. And secondly, to offer a Guide for students to help them ask these critical questions for themselves, in a collaborative inquiry with others.

### *1. The Bridge test.*

How does a given practice (in a course or on site) help students build bridges that go from their academic/intellectual work to their experiential realities and then to reflective interpretations? Have they been able to articulate the connections, the disjunctions, the contradictions, insights, the opportunities that drawing these inferences can reveal? Bear in mind, building real bridges takes time, tools, and effort.

### *2. The Application test.*

Many of the passionately held ideas we have discussed here—from philosophical pragmatism, engaged education, public deliberation, community engaged writing and rhetoric to building grounded theories—have at their core concerns for social action, interaction, being useful, making change, and their consequences. But in the humanities, school is not always designed to teach, promote, track or sometimes even care about the application and outcomes of what students learned. So, we might ask whether or not our given educational practice is asking students to go beyond the experience of being immersed in an activity to consider an application of what they have learned beyond this horizon. Notice, as a foundation for transforming knowledge, this is asking what they have *taught themselves*. As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 5, for some students the new application turned up in other courses, in their professional plans as a writer, engineer, economist, or in decisions in family business. For others it informed their role in other community connections, in political or social activism, even in their sense of identity.

An educational practice supporting *application* would invite students to extend that *bridge* built from theory, to experience, to reflective interpretation, on out into the unknown. However, these are still students, in a course, not reviewing options in the career planning office. This educational practice calls, first, for real thinking, uncovering applications of an idea, drawing inferences, seeing the connection to problems, imagination. It is genuinely constructive work. And secondly, to go beyond a thought exercise, as useful as one may be, in Chapter 4 we saw students using a written reflection on their *current application* of these ideas to raise consciousness of applying learning as an immediate, self-conscious move. It had never occurred to Justine—Chapter 4—that teaching argument involved more than adversarial debate. The test here is whether a given teaching practice is supporting a new metacognitive awareness of the choices a given application entails for themselves and others, the assumptions they are working from, and the consequences of acting.

### 3. The Discovery and Change Test

This attention to application has an equally distinguished background in both rhetoric and liberatory education. One of the founding voices of contemporary rhetoric and composition, Richard E. Young, captured this approach with his book title: *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. Unlike classical studies or communication's focus on argument or persuasion, this rhetoric reimagined the ancient art of *Invention*, which put the art of meaning making at the heart of what writers do. In doing so it celebrated the power of writing itself as first of all an act of discovery *for the writer*. How then do our students perceive their own acts of written meaning making, beyond the production of a text? Are they thinking about their thinking?

I am (well, was) in fact working out what I wanted to I mean here while walking down a deeply wooded trail, stopping to jot down alternative sentence bits on this scrap of paper, all the while attending to the sheer exuberance of low spring plants, shaded by towering trees, sheltering some insistently courting bird calls around me. And in the next instant, I began attending to the steady stream of ideas, connections, memories, and all the words that began to pop up as fresh possibilities that could create or support (somehow, but just how exactly?) this idea of "Discovery and Change." Soon I was also thinking about thinking, about how all this was being brought into consciousness, to be worked with, by that willful act of writing. (And I should note, words to be again revised as I finish this manuscript.)

Pace Coleridge's myth of inspiration, I would *not* say, even in this meditative space, that all this rose up before me "with a parallel production of correspondent expression, without any sensation or consciousness of effort."<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that inspiration isn't real and amazingly productive, but it is unlikely to do the work we have in mind that can actually build bridges into unknown territory and construct the inferences that envision and test their applications. Rather than merely putting an intact meaning into words, this kind of writing is often an extended constructive process of figuring out what inchoate felt connections could actually mean, drawing new inferences, challenging old ones, testing it against the words we do have. And it helps to realize all this is a normal process.

Let me shift to another discourse (often a revealing tool for invention). In teaching for metacognitive awareness, we are inviting students to turn their yet-to-be-connected pockets of "knowing" into an articulated form. That will include first exploring disparate parts of one's memory networks (some salient or accessible, some not), then translating multiple mental representations (some visual, others affective, propositional, as well as linguistic) into words. And the language itself may still be writer-based, ill-considered, or vague, lacking the nuanced complexity of a sophisticated representation (Flower, "Images"). And as expert/novice studies suggest, experienced writers go well beyond an expressive utterance to building an actively negotiated meaning (Flower, *Construction; Writer-Based*).

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5. This account of composing *Kubla Khan* turned out, in fact, to be quite fictitious.

Echoing the value of awareness, Paulo Freire's liberatory "problem-posing education" describes the central goal as achieving "critical consciousness"—learning to perceive social contradictions and take action against oppression (19). And like Richard Young, in the test he proposes learners would combine the rhetoric of articulated discovery with metacognitive *awareness* to carry out the purposeful work of *change*. As Freire puts it, "to exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (88).

This test looks at our students' metacognitive awareness of their own writing as a process of Discovery and Change. Such an agenda adapts grounded observation and theory building for an explicit purpose—for action, for making change, and for the pragmatist's search for outcomes. The consequential vision of John Dewey and the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West that shaped my understanding of intercultural inquiry speak directly to this larger project of locating the educational power of community engagement in its outcomes (Flower, *Community*). Dewey would move us from forming hypotheses to the ongoing critical search which locates the meaning of this hypothesis in outcomes. The value of our conceptions is determined "by the consequences they effect in existence as it is perceptibly experienced" (Quest 132). West adds the ethical imperative to probe experiential consequences for the most marginalized. This interaction is eloquently captured by Rachel Shah: "West's deep and soulful stance against injustice adds a necessary analysis of power to Dewey's emphasis on experiential knowledge, antifoundational questioning, and feet-on-the-ground commitment to action" (17). I would ask, are my students aware of the power of or reflecting on their own process of "discovery and change?"

## Supporting Grounded-Theory Actors

As a teacher I have found these three tests of engaged education helpful. But at this point it is appropriate to turn the inquiry over to students: to shift from the tests of our curriculum to students' reflection on their own in-process theory building and its bridge to action. As people become self-conscious agents of their own learning, the opportunity to compare their developing understanding and uncertainties with one another can open up both possibilities and useful problems. The following collaborative tool is written for students to use to test their own progress in the same three curriculum areas we have been considering above: building *bridges*, envisioning *applications*, and linking *discovery to change*. The questions are designed to help them prepare for a more in-depth discussion with colleagues (in the class and community) of their problem-oriented "theory-in-progress."<sup>6</sup>

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6. The notion of sharing our thinking, hypotheses, learning with our community partners is an important step from service to collaboration. One of the best, and very grounded, guides to this is found in Rachael Shah's *Rewriting Partnerships*.



## What Is Your Grounded Theory Saying Today? A Preparation for Making Thinking Visible

As a grounded-theory builder, use these questions to prepare for a collaborative discussion by asking yourself, “How would I explain this to myself, or to someone else who asks me to.” As a Collaborative Planning Partner in the role of Supporter, prepare to ask these probing questions and help your Partner take the inquiry deeper.

### 1. Entering into Engagement

1. Community engaged courses take people into a new world and an unfamiliar, complex *activity system*. How would you compare what you expected to what you found?
2. You probably ran into or noticed a couple of *problems*. How did you interpret them?
3. How did you *respond*?
4. So, what did you conclude or *learn* from that experience?
5. Can you think of any *rivals* to how you named the problem or chose to act?

### 2. Reading the Situation

1. Whenever writing or speaking is involved, you are in a rhetorical situation. How did you *read* the rhetorical situation you found yourself in, especially when you looked at it as part of a larger activity?
2. Did you have to *interact* with any institutions, traditions, or rules? How so?
3. Were you aware of the *roles* you and other people were supposed to play? Or of your place in a *hierarchy* with relations based on status or power? How did you *respond* to that situation?
4. Did you ever need to switch from one *Discourse* to another? If you weren't already an “insider” in one of those Discourses, how did you respond?
5. Did you find yourself drawing on any particularly useful *tools*? They could be material ones, such as technology, scheduled planning sessions, taking notes. Or conceptual ones, such as taking an inquiry stance in an intercultural contact zone, deliberately seeking out rival hypotheses, or methods you have learned for political, social, cultural, or cognitive analysis.
6. Activity systems are usually full of buried *contradictions* and ill-defined *conflicts*. As these areas are often the best sites for change, did you uncover any?
7. How did you define the problem—and its rivals?

8. What did you do in *response* (ignore it, describe it, discuss it, propose action, imagine consequences, or act)?

### 3. Collaborating in a Contact Zone

1. Community engagement will put us in contact with some significant differences. Thinking of your community partner, what have been the two or three most important differences for you? Don't rest with obvious ones like race, gender, orientation . . . Also consider barriers such as background, attitudes, assumptions, goals, and valuable differences in experiential knowledge, insight, and skills.
2. Was there something you had to work on together where these differences could matter? How so? Were they surprising, confusing, problematic, useful?
3. When you tried to collaborate and needed to negotiate your differences, did you hit a problem? How did you try to deal with it? And if you successfully worked something out, how did you do so?
4. What would you say you learned?

### 4. Becoming a Grounded-Theory Actor

1. Back when you first compared what you expected with what you found, you started building a personal interpretation or "theory" of the situation. As you moved to building your own more in-depth, *practical grounded theory*, what did you decide to focus on or try to understand?
2. More specifically, how would you define the meaningful *problem* with which you hope to engage? Think of it as a revealing conflict or one of those contradictions that frequently occur between two assumptions, practices, or forces that make a difference.
3. How many ways (tools) have you found to closely observe and document this problem in action?
4. What are some rival interpretations you have considered? And what are the consequences those ways of seeing your problem might have in *this situation*?
5. When you consider ways to respond to your problem, how would you meet the demands for a morally, socially, or politically significant practice?
6. Does your response name explicit, practical strategies for change?
7. Effective grounded-practical-theory builders are also observing and reflecting on their own learning and thinking, on their growing repertoire of strategies, and on their ways of dealing with conflict. Looking back at your own thinking in this project so far, what problems did you encounter, and what have you taught yourself?
8. So, what will you do now?