

# Chapter 19. Engaging and Amplifying Community Voices: An Interview Assignment Sequence

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This chapter presents a community-based interview unit that I teach in a sophomore-level soundwriting course—a course that focuses almost exclusively on audio—at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Montgomery County, Indiana. The assignment is called Humans of Montgomery County (HOMC), and it is modeled on Brandon Stanton’s immensely successful *Humans of New York* website (Stanton, n.d.) and book projects (2013, 2015).

The course is called Audio Rhetoric and Creative Writing, and it is cross-listed by our English and rhetoric (formerly, speech communication) departments. Throughout this chapter I refer to the course as simply “Audio Rhetoric.”

I had tried an interview assignment in the previous iterations of the course, but I felt the students’ products fell somewhat flat. In those versions, students interviewed family members or favorite professors and coaches, and the soundwriting was not frequently framed for a larger audience. Many of these interviews had a twinge of stories we’d heard before, even if they were meaningful to the students who conducted the interview. My soundwriters sometimes failed to imagine an audience outside the college community, or they were too close to the interviewee to be able to edit ruthlessly enough to produce a concise story. In the final analysis, these early interviews were not surprising or compelling enough to be successful.

The idea for HOMC came from a Wabash staff member, Steve Charles, Editor of the *Wabash Magazine*. Steve had followed my soundwriting course from the beginning and had featured some of the student work on our college website (Paige, 2015) and profiled one audio essay in his blog and in the alumni magazine (Charles, 2014a, 2014b). He stopped by my office one day to ask whether we might get students to do an audio version of what *Humans of New York* does in image and text.

I was drawn to Steve’s idea for Humans of Montgomery County for many reasons, but I’ll focus on two. I liked the idea of facilitating for students a positive, genuine, face-to-face conversation with a local community member. Our students have many misconceptions about the town where they attend college and its residents. Could the interview project help correct assumptions and dispel some myths about local residents whom students sometimes derisively call “townies”? Second, I liked the idea of producing a dedicated website for the

community about the community. This seemed a way to give back to, rather than simply use, the community for our own educational purposes. Perhaps this project could be something like sustainable storytelling and soundwriting.

### Access and Accessibility

As with any course and assignment-sequence design, it is crucial to think about inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The challenges and opportunities surrounding accessibility are present in two ways in this assignment sequence.

First is the question of which students can access the technology needed to complete the assignment. There were three ways I provided students access to recording equipment in the course:

- Our Educational Technology Center has a soundbooth where we record the campus podcast and other audio tracks, and I worked with the supervisors of the space to ensure students could reserve time in this booth to record interviews.
- I was also able to apply for a small grant from our Center for Innovation, Business, and Entrepreneurship to purchase Zoom recorders and external microphones for students to record community members. Students checked out these Zoom recorders from me when they wanted them for an assignment.
- My institution's Educational Technology Center has a program where instructors can apply to have an iPad for each student in the course for the length of the semester. Each time I've taught the course, I have been able to issue students iPads to use as recording and listening devices. I use the free application Voice Record Pro as the supported recording software for the class.

I suggest instructors outline two or three ways students can complete the assignment requirements using campus-owned equipment in your syllabus. I've made sure that students have access to the computer lab in the Educational Technology Center (where student workers can assist with software questions) for editing their assignments. The iPads that students use throughout the course and the Macs in the computer lab have GarageBand pre-installed, but my students and I prefer the open-access software Audacity. While most students have some way to record voices on their smartphones and have access to a personal computer for audio editing, I think it is crucial that instructors not assume equal access to recording and editing technology and account for it in some way.

Second is the question of whether audio interviews assume all participants and audience members can hear, and therefore exclude Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Whether or not you have Deaf or hard-of-hearing students in the class, I think all soundwriting courses should include readings and discussion of how

audio reaches and fails to reach certain audiences. I suggest two close-captioned videos for the syllabus.

Early in this course, students watch *Touch the Sound: A Sound Journey with Evelyn Glennie* (Riedelscheimer, 2004), a film about the music-making and musical collaborations of a percussionist who is Deaf. In discussing the film, students note how sound is a bodily experience, rather than simply “an ear thing.” Another powerful text for discussing how educational spaces, and the hearing community more broadly, excludes deaf and hard of hearing learners is Brenda Jo Brueggeman’s literacy narrative on YouTube, *Why I Mind* (InfoStories, 2011). With these viewing assignments, I show how soundwriting can include the work of writers and artists who hear differently than the majority population. These videos are especially useful for amplifying the abilities of Deaf and hard-of-hearing artists and writers, as well as for introducing the necessity of transcription for making soundwriting inclusive. Other ways instructors might expand this assignment to include Deaf or hard-of-hearing students and interview subjects include the following:

- Allowing students to videotape the interview so that interviewees and subjects can communicate in American Sign Language
- Requiring transcripts of all audio interviews. I have not consistently done so in the past; I will confess that it was something I too easily overlooked when I did not have students in the course who needed hearing accommodations. But I recognize this is also an excuse, and transcripts are something I will require in future iterations of the assignment. Even when students may not be Deaf or hard-of-hearing themselves, the audience members for completed audio interviews may find an audio-only text inaccessible. Creating and requiring transcripts is an excellent opportunity to teach students about the importance of reaching many audiences with their work.

Exploring professional transcription services. They are quite affordable for short interview assignments. For instance, Rev.com charges about \$1.00/minute. You might be able to get a small grant from your institution or the community to transcribe interviews, especially when an assignment builds bridges between campus and community, such as this one does. If you do outsource the transcribing, students MUST edit the transcript to make sure it matches the audio; a transcription service saves time, but it is not perfect.

### The Soundwriting Assignment and Its Place in the Course

This community-based interview assignment takes up nearly half the semester-long course—though there are certainly ways to condense that timeline. The interview is the second of three major soundwriting assignments in the semester: The first is a single-voiced, unlayered audio essay; the second is the HOMC interview; and the third assignment is a layered creative production of the student’s design.

For this assignment, students met with a community member not directly affiliated with the college who had volunteered for an audio interview. Students took the interviewee’s photograph, recorded an interview, and then later edited the interview into a 2–3-minute story. The photographs and soundwriting clips were posted on a dedicated *Humans of Montgomery County* website, sometimes after further editing. I would like to do more with the website; I don’t feel it got the visibility I was hoping for. In the future, I would like to work with a local library or museum to do a *Humans of Montgomery County* installation.

## Assignment Sequence, Annotated

### I. Readings, Listening Assignments, and Reflection to Observe Interview Skills and Frame the Assignment

Below is the main assignment prompt I give students, which gives a brief overview of all 12 of the steps you’ll find below.

#### **Humans of Montgomery County Interview Assignment**

##### **Audio Rhetoric and Creative Writing**

**Note:** The final draft of this assignment contains an audio component, a photograph, and an alphabetic reflective letter.

##### **Your Assignment**

You will work in pairs with a classmate to interview and photograph a resident of Montgomery County who is not closely affiliated with Wabash College. The purpose of the assignment is to have a genuine conversation with someone who has chosen to make their home in Montgomery County and to publish that conversation for all who have access to our collaboratively created *Humans of Montgomery County* website. Your goal is to edit the interview into a 2–3-minute clip—to produce a “sound paragraph” that tells a story and captures something compelling—human—about your interview subject.

We will spend several weeks in this course preparing for this assignment via readings, listening assignments, practice interviews, and editing/production exercises. But as we break down the *Humans of Montgomery County* [HOMC] assignment into discrete tasks, let’s keep in mind the overarching community-based goals for this assignment.

##### **Three Community-based Goals for this Assignment**

1. By meeting people in the local community and recording their stories, you will get to know and understand Crawfordsville and Montgomery County as a community in its own right, not simply as the location of Wabash College.
2. Your interview subjects will get to know a Wabash student one-on-one, in a respectful and intellectually interesting relationship, and their stories will be honored by students and the College through inclusion on the HOMC website.

3. The HOMC website will be a visual and auditory representation of the symbiotic nature of Wabash and Montgomery County.

### Due Dates for This Assignment

*[I allot approximately one month for full assignment cycle.]*

[Begin date] Practice Interview with a Wabash “stranger” is due. Three to 5 minutes.

[Next class] Receive name and contact info for interviewee. Meet with class partner and agree on times you are both available for interviews.

[Before next class] Contact your interviewee and arrange a time and place to meet. Give the interviewee options for meeting place (quiet public space, soundbooth on campus, interviewee’s home) and honor their choice.

[Next class] Submit seven to ten interview questions for your interview and two-paragraph rationale for your questions/approach to the interview. Include both discovery (What was it like?) and reflective (What do you think it means?) questions.

[Five days later] Interviews must be recorded and photographs taken by this date. Post full-length interview to Canvas.

[Over the next week] Meet with either Steve Charles, Rich Paige, or Dr. Lamberton for a “production conference” to discuss your raw interview and approach to the edited version.

[One week later] Edited interview (rough draft). Aim for 2–3 minutes. Email your two best photographs to Steve Charles and Dr. Lamberton. **BRING HEADPHONES TO CLASS FOR PEER FEEDBACK.**

[One week later] Final draft of edited interview and Reflective Letter due. **BRING HEADPHONES TO CLASS FOR LISTENING PARTY.**

[Next class] Rough draft of thank-you note due in class. Revise notes and copy to College notecards in class.

*Bring interviewee’s address if you have it, or let Dr. Lamberton know if you don’t. Dr. Lamberton will supply stamps and mail cards.*

While I was working out these details, and assembling a list of 15–16 interviewees, I gave students assignments that focused on listening to and reflecting on various audio interview techniques.

Texts I use for these scaffolding assignments vary from year to year, but some of my favorites include a selection from the StoryCorps.org website, Terry Gross’s (2011) interview with David Carr, Marc Maron’s (2015b) interview with Barack Obama, and Maron’s (2015a) interview with Terry Gross. Alex Blumberg’s (2014) CreativeLive workshop, titled *Power Your Podcast with Storytelling*, has two helpful episodes, “The Art of the Interview” and “The Power of the Right Question.” Finally, the graphic essay *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, by Jessica Abel and Ira Glass (1999), is helpful for many phases of the interview assignment, from preparing to interviewing to editing. We focus particular attention on Abel and Glass’s point about the *visual nature* of audio storytelling and how an interview must help their

listeners see the story or scene by asking the right question (1999, pp. 13-14). I follow each of these listening, viewing, or reading assignments with in-class discussion of how interviews work, and I often ask students to post a two-paragraph reflection on Canvas before the class period that focuses their attention on the choices that interviewers make.

Note: The difference between these listening assignment interviews—all long form interviews—and what we eventually asked the students to produce is largely one of length. We asked for 2–3 minutes of produced soundwriting, and in order to honor and foreground the story, most students edited out their own voices. We did, however, fudge the 3-minute limit when we felt we could not do justice to the story without a longer clip. Our rule of thumb was, if it was over 3 minutes, it had to be very good, very tight.

## 2. Storytelling Website Exploration and Low-stakes Alphabetic Reflection

We also asked students to spend a day exploring the *Humans of New York* website and to post a reflection on an entry (photo + paragraph-length quotation) that they found particularly compelling. One of our explicit instructions was that students should aim for the soundwriting version of a compelling paragraph, a brief narrative moment.

In the second and successive years, we also assigned students to listen to interviews on the *Humans of Montgomery County* website, so that their peers' soundwriting also became model texts.

## 3. In-class Session(s) with College Public Relations Team: Interviewing and Photographing, Answering Questions and Troubleshooting

Richard Paige and Steve Charles from our institution's Public Relations office came in as guest experts, and after some lessons and practice with photographing human subjects, Rich plugged his headphones into a Zoom recorder and asked for a student volunteer to be interviewed in front of the class. Rich told the class that he often mentions his own proclivity to make mistakes as a way of making the interviewee more comfortable, and he also suggested keeping the headphones off of one ear so that you look less shielded from the interviewee.

Students were asked to listen for when Rich and the volunteer got to “a story,” or at the very least to identify the most interesting thing the volunteer said in the 3–4-minute demonstration. The mock interview helped students see the importance of asking follow up questions. Part of the reason this worked as a demonstration, I think, is that the instructor of record did not conduct the interview; it was conducted by a guest speaker who interviewed people for a living. Though we never asked deeply personal questions, I worry the power dynamic might be uncomfortable if the instructor were interviewing the student. Even if

you do not have co-teachers from public relations, you might consider asking a local journalist or other expert to come in for a one-day class session to model interviewing skills.

#### 4. On-campus Audio Interview with a Student They Don't Know

Following Rich's in-class interview, we asked students to find someone on campus (in the gym, in the cafeteria, on the campus mall) and ask if they could interview them for a class assignment. Audio Rhetoric students were instructed to follow Rich's in-class interviewing example, asking questions and then follow-up questions for 5 minutes or so until they thought they had something interesting. Assigning students in the class to interview one another as an in-class assignment, and pairing them with someone they don't know, may be a simpler way to practice interviewing and could avoid concerns about obtaining permission forms for recording strangers.

This assignment helps students work out jitters and test equipment before the higher-stakes interview with the community member and also gives them a chance to reflect on what they think went well and not well about the interview. We spent some of the next class session sharing interview experiences and exchanging strategies and insights. For the on campus "stranger" interview, I simply gave credit for completion.

#### 5. Receive Interview Subjects and Contact Information. Work with Project Partner to Come Up with Initial Interview Questions.

One question Steve, Rich, and I debated the first time we taught this assignment was how much to tell our students about their interview subject before they met.<sup>1</sup> Should we give students a lead on the story, or allow them to discover it for themselves? The first year, we allowed students to draw the name of an interviewee out of a hat, and we decided not to tell them much about their interview subject; we especially didn't want to over-direct the story we wanted them to "get." Then we waited. Would the nursing home resident whose parents had died in a murder-suicide when she was 19 years old and about to depart for college share her story? Would the single mother who had temporarily lost custody of her child due to drug addiction but was now a social worker and rehab leader at her local church talk about her journey of recovery?

In both cases, the answer was "yes." But in subsequent years we decided to do less random pairing of students and interview subjects, and to give the students a few sentences of background about the interviewee that hinted at a story or point of entry for conversation. For example:

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1. See this book's companion website for a detailed checklist to help ensure students are prepared for their interviews.



Has lived in Montgomery County since 1990. Graduate of Southmont High School. Project Manager on a crew that builds grain elevators all over the Midwest for a local company, so he is on the road all year except for the winter. He hires a crew of largely Spanish-speaking migrant workers. Has a teenage daughter and is an Army veteran who was in the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, NC, so he jumped out of planes frequently. Loves video games. Helps care for an adult brother with a disability.

Or:

Historian for Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church with a deep knowledge of the church's connection to the underground railroad. Her husband was a Wabash alumnus, and her mother made "soul food dinners" for Wabash students who were brothers of the Malcolm X Institute.

I prefer the less random pairings, where students whose interests or backgrounds align in some way with their interview subject's. For example, a theater major at the college might pair with a woman who has been a leader in local community theater, or a student from a rural town and working-class background might pair with a community member who builds grain storage elevators for a living. Because students are not journalism majors and this is often their first interview assignment, I found some engineering for interests made for more excitement on students' parts going into the interview. Yet because human beings are complex, there were still plenty of surprises and differences among interviewees and students. In any case, other instructors may have very good reasons for taking a less directive approach.

A couple of times, students who had community ties asked if they could choose their own subject. One student had a fraternity brother from town whose father was a paramedic and had many stories of opioid interventions. Another student had worked for a moving service in town and thought his co-worker, a young single father, had a fascinating story. Still another wanted to interview the owner of his favorite Mexican restaurant. In these cases, we were happy to accommodate the students' own suggestions for interview subjects—as long as we talked with them about their interviewee first. I tried to make sure these interview subjects received the same initial explanatory email from me. In all cases, students had to get a signed informed consent letter whether I had successfully contacted the subject or not.

## 6. Set Up Interview Time and Conduct Interview in Pairs.

**Take Photograph. Take Informed Consent Letter, Get Required Signatures, and Return Signature Page to Instructor.**

It was important to me that students worked in pairs for several reasons. The first is the increased safety and comfort of both students and interviewees. Second,



each student had the chance to be a photographer and an interviewer—but didn't have to be both at once. Third, students had a second set of ears during the interview and found their project partner was a resource as they made tough editing decisions or reflected on the meaning of the community-based interaction.<sup>2</sup>

I urged students to let the community member choose the meeting place, among a set of options where there was likely not to be a lot of background noise: in the interviewee's home (or assisted-living unit); on our college campus in the sound booth; or at another neutral space, such as the interviewee's church or the public library. One reason it seemed important to let interviewees select the space is that we wanted them to feel at ease.

My students were also incredibly receptive to etiquette suggestions and tips when it came to meeting their subject for the first time. I did not assume that they would know things like "Be sure to position yourself near the entrance to the public library so your interviewee will have no trouble finding you upon arrival."

### 7. Upload the Full, Uncut Interview. Upload the Best Two Photographs.

It is important to have the uncut interviews in case you decide the final draft needs further editing before publication and in case the community member later asks for a copy of the interview.

We asked students to submit two photographs. In a few cases, the photographs had to be reshot, but most were suitable—especially the second year after a little more in-class instruction in photography skills.

### 8. Prepare an Interview Log and Create Storyboard for Interview.

Students resist doing this in great detail, but it is a reverse outlining exercise that allows them to see what they have and see patterns, especially if the interviewee circled back to stories throughout the interview. Abel and Glass's (1999) *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* provides a helpful model and rationale for how to do this (pp. 15-16). In subsequent years, student models may be even more helpful for prompting students to generate the most useful interview logs so they can draft the story.

### 9. In-class Peer Feedback on Rough Drafts

I give students the following form to guide their peer review in class:

#### **Peer Feedback Form for Rough Draft of Edited HOMC Interview**

Student Who Conducted the Interview:

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2. See this book's companion website for a sample letter and form to give interview subjects. Your institution's IRB may have specific suggestions or requirements.

Reviewer's Name:

*After listening to your peer's audio rough draft, answer the following questions. Try to explain your own thinking with specific examples or justifications.*

1. What's your favorite part of this interview? Explain.
2. Is it clear what/whom the interviewer and interviewee are referring to all the way through? If not, what specific additions or explanations you would recommend and why?
3. Are there any cuts that don't make sense and maybe something becomes confusing? Explain your questions or responses as a listener.
4. Do you have suggestions about where the narrative can be cut? Explain your thinking.
5. Do you have any suggested revisions for the **sound quality** of this recording? Explain.

These can be done outside of class, but I always do them in class for about an hour and then end with a discussion. Students set up listening stations with hard copies of the peer feedback handout next to their interview draft. The class members and I circulate and listen to the drafts, filling out a feedback form for each story we listen to. I ask students to complete five to six during the hour and direct them a bit to keep them circulating rather than congregating at their friends' story stations so that I can ensure that all students receive about the same amount of peer feedback.

For the last 15 minutes of class, we gather as a group for reflection and discussion. Some of my favorite questions during this wrap-up are the following: 1) What did you hear that you can learn from? 2) What was one of the best things you heard and why? 3) What suggestions do you have for the class collectively about how to revise? 4) What questions do you have for your classmates and me about your next revision steps?

## 10. Revision Conferences

If you can find the time to meet with students individually to discuss their first drafts and their storyboards (even better—if you have time to listen to the full audio interviews beforehand), I think this revision/editing conference can go a long way toward ensuring the quality of the final edit and minimizing the amount of post-semester editing you may feel you need to do before publishing the story on the website. At a minimum, I do provide students one to two paragraphs of written feedback on their rough drafts.

## 11. Final Edit and Reflective Letter

Students reflect on their final draft by writing a reflective letter with the following guidelines:

### Reflective Letter Assignment on Final Draft Interview, Humans of Montgomery County

After you've completed your final draft of the Humans of Montgomery County Interview, I would like you to write a letter (addressed to me) in which you reflect on what you've learned through the different phases of the assignment.

Remember that one goal of this course is that you increasingly think about *soundwriting as a process* (in all its glory and frustration), rather than hold onto the belief that everything you write as “finished” the moment a deadline arrives. So think of the Reflective Letter as an opportunity to consider and comment on what has happened in this creative process and what it adds to your critical thinking about audio rhetoric.

In your Reflective Letter, you should address the following:

- In one to two sentences, state the main idea of your final interview. What story does it tell?
- Describe the *composing* and editing process used to revise your audio project.
- Discuss what you see as the strengths of the final version in terms of content (ideas, explanations, editing decisions) and style (sound elements, organization, voice, clarity, etc.).
- Which of the response/feedback activities were most useful in writing and revising the recording? If you had more time (or inclination), what would you add to or change in this project?
- What have you discovered about soundwriting, the craft of interviewing, and perhaps even about yourself more generally through this project?
- What questions remain for you as you submit this recording? These might be specific questions for your interviewee, for me, or they may be more general questions about the process of soundwriting.

As a final word of explanation and caution, let me say that the Reflective Letter need not and should not be an “advertisement” for your project. I am looking for your evolving ability to think about soundwriting and the task of inviting others to share their stories, that is, how and why it works—or doesn't!—in certain situations.

I look forward to reading your Reflective Letter and your revision of the audio assignment! As always, please let me know if you have questions about this assignment. I'll be happy to help as much as I can.

I make the final draft due about a week after the first draft, but if you can afford the time for individual revision conferences, I think it makes sense to give students more time to revise (so that they can meet with you and then have time to process and implement your ideas and theirs).

The reflective letters serve two main purposes. First, they encourage students to reflect the soundwriting process as a way of solidifying what they've learned. Second, the letters allow me to gauge the students' individual responses to the Humans of Montgomery County Project, their comfort and their recommendations for whether to continue the project—and why.

## 12. Thank-you Note

I find these notes are an important element of increasing good will among students and community members, and I also happen to think my students get a bonus life-skills lesson in how to write a meaningful note of thanks.<sup>3</sup> I devote part of a class session to revising drafts of the thank-you notes as a way to signify its importance to the project. Saying thank you is not an afterthought; instead, it is an extension of the goodwill built into the project.

I use department funds to purchase stamps for the notes and mail them myself, to ensure each community member receives one. One community member told me he called and left a voicemail for the college president about the quality of our students upon receiving the note.

### Sample Student Projects

In the initial iterations of this project, we did not require transcriptions of the audio interviews.<sup>4</sup> This was a mistake, something I simply failed to think about, and upon reflection, we missed a valuable opportunity to engage students in conversation about the importance of universal design. In future iterations of the project, I will require transcriptions.

1. “Don’t Be the One That’s the Life Sucker” by Austin Myers
2. “Struck by Lightning” by Brent Poling
3. “Growing Up with a Handicapped Sibling, Kids Can be Cruel” by Zachary Kintz
4. “The People Like It Here. It’s Real Mexican Food” by Noah Levi
5. “We Had Some Really Great Nurses and Some Really Bad Ones” by Dylan Seikel

### Reflection

**Jaleel Grandberry:** This has been one of my favorite classroom projects here at Wabash. I really enjoyed the process of going out into the surrounding community and meeting new people.<sup>5</sup> In my letter to my interviewee, I talked about how, as students of Wabash, we can often separate ourselves from Crawfordsville and Montgomery County. I feel projects like this are really beneficial in getting students to break out of the box and have the opportunity to meet great people of

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3. See this book’s companion website for a template assignment to guide students in drafting thank-you notes.

4. Five student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book’s companion website.

5. The audio version of L. Jill Lamberton’s reflection can be found on the book’s companion website.

the community. From experiences like this, not only do we build connections, but we better understand our surrounding community. We see how we can continue to help impacting the community, or how the community impacts us.

**Jill Lamberton:** That's my student, Jaleel. The assignment he's referring to is an interview with a local community member whom he'd never met before. My name is Jill Lamberton. I teach in the English Department at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Crawfordsville is in Montgomery County, and for the past couple of years, my audio rhetoric students have been conducting audio interviews with community members who are not formally affiliated with the college. Once our students have recorded these conversations—and many of them run between 30 and 90 minutes—I ask the students to create a log of the interview and to edit it into one story, something like an audio paragraph. I tell them to aim for 2 to 3 minutes, though students frequently end up with final drafts that run as long as 4 or 5 minutes in order to honor the story.

Eventually, we post the story and a photograph of the interviewee on a dedicated website we call *Humans of Montgomery County*. It's a project we've modeled on Brandon Stanton's enormously successful *Humans of New York*. So, I've had two collaborators in teaching this unit. They're talented journalists from our college's public relations team.

**Rich Paige:** My name is Richard Paige. I am the Associate Director of Communications and Marketing at Wabash College.

**Steve Charles:** I'm Steve Charles. I'm the editor of *Wabash Magazine*.

**Rich:** How long have you been helping people tell their stories?

**Steve:** [*laughs*] Um, let me see. First time was probably recording my grandparents when I was in high school. I was 14, so that would be about 48 years. How about you, Rich?

**Rich:** You've got me beat by a couple of decades there. I've only been doing this full-time for about 25 years now.

**Jill:** I asked them to help for two reasons. First, they tell stories for a living. As members of the PR department, their stories are designed to keep the college community connected to itself. I thought I could learn something from them, and second, I knew my students would respond well to having interview experts as guest lecturers.

Frankly, I was hoping I might get a class session or two out of Rich and Steve, but I asked if they'd be co-teachers for the whole unit, and they said yes. Having the right collaborators infused this assignment with all kinds of life, even if it also came with a bit of attitude.

**Rich:** [*jokingly*] It's hard to be serious when everybody else in the room is not!

**Steve:** [*laughter*] That was a good one. [*sarcastically*] That's for you, Jill!

**Rich:** [*sarcastically, as if impersonating Jill's response*] Screw you guys! [*laughs*]

**Jill:** We had two major learning outcomes for the community interview assignment, and I'll tell you what they are, even though I realize they may sound crazy-ambitious. First, we wanted to teach our students to be better listeners.

**Steve:** A stereotype of guys in this age group is that they talk a lot but don't listen, and so what we wanted to do was teach them to listen.

**Jill:** Second, we wanted to see if we could improve the town-gown relationships by getting people to sit down together and tell stories.

**Steve:** This town-gown thing here is pretty interesting and sometimes strained, and it seemed like stories is a real good way to break through barriers. A way for people to realize that we had much more in common.

**Rich:** That was what was interesting about it to me. We were going to try to arm the students with the skills necessary to collect these things and then send them out into the community and do it.

**Jill:** It might be useful to know a bit more about our context. So, Wabash College is one of three remaining all-male colleges in the United States. The other two are Hampden-Sydney in Virginia and Morehouse in Atlanta, in case you're wondering. Our student body is small, under 1,000, and though my students come from all over the US and from around the world, about 75% of them are Hoosiers. Those of us who work at Wabash know it's a place where young men defy cultural stereotypes about college-aged men way more often than they confirm them. It's a fascinating place to teach, but that's a topic for a different audio essay.

So, about the town: Crawfordsville is a town of about 16,000 in the corn and soybean fields of west-central Indiana. The young people who grow up here, and those who attend college here, have a tendency to see their futures shining most brightly somewhere else. Yet, there are many who choose to stay in Crawfordsville, and those of us who live here know scores of local residents who are thoughtful, educated, big-hearted, human beings. We wanted our students to see more of that.

In the alphabetic part of this chapter, I outline all the scaffolding steps we took and share several assignment handouts, so I won't repeat myself here. Instead, what I want to emphasize right now is how impressed I was, even touched, by how much the students *wanted* to do a good job with these interviews.

**Steve:** Yeah. The level of buy-in . . . I mean, right from the beginning. I think that was one of my hesitations. I mean, for anybody who Jill is trying to talk about this program, where you think the students might not really want to do it, *they wanted to do it*.

**Jill:** The students worked really hard, perhaps especially after they had met with the community member and felt a responsibility to tell their story well. But they worked hard beforehand too. Here's one of my students, Zach.

**Zach Kintz:** I was super-nervous for the whole thing in the beginning. As for preparing for the interview, I did a lot of work in the recording booth. I received help from a senior who helped me understand the equipment. I spent at least three hours getting comfortable in the booth before my interview. The day of the interview, I got into the recording booth about an hour and 30 minutes before my interview to set everything up and to test the sound levels.

**Jill:** Zach interviewed a community member named Cory Thrush who talked

about his older brother, Rob, who has an intellectual disability. Cory explained that, at 50, Rob's mind is more like that of a 12-year-old.

**Cory Thrush:** One of the tough things about growing up with a handicapped sibling: Kids can be very cruel. I spent a lot of my younger years growing up with Rob getting into fights defending him, and getting my butt kicked by older kids. It shaped me from the sense that I have zero patience for people that make fun of handicapped, disabled, special-needs people. I'm a pretty calm guy, pretty laid-back. Situations that involve stuff like that, I, I, there's no place for it. I tend to look at people like that, that there's something missing in you. If you can make fun of somebody like that, or be cruel to somebody like that, you're missing a human part that I don't know how to give you or how to teach you.

**Zach:** As for the interview itself, I thought it went very well. I'm not sure if it was my connection with him about handicapped siblings, or just the context itself. The conversation between Cory and I was deep and meaningful. Honestly, the interview highlighted one of the best moments of my short time here at Wabash. After I had my interview recorded, I knew exactly what story I wanted to pursue. The story of his brother, and how it shaped him as a person really needed to be told.

**Jill:** If the first part of this project was about developing interviewing skills and making a human connection, the soundwriting portion came in the editing and production phase. After the students had completed their final drafts, I asked them to write a reflective letter in which they articulate their soundwriting process and what they think they learned from the unit. The reflective letters tend to highlight one of the reasons I'm a born-again soundwriting teacher. Here's the thing: After 20 years of teaching traditional college writing classes where I urge students to put voice in their writing and, especially, trying to get them to grasp the power of deep revision, I'm amazed at how my audio rhetoric students get editing. I mean, listen to the kinds of things they say about the time and the care they put into their final drafts. First, here's Jaleel.

**Jaleel:** I believe I ultimately captured the story. However, the process of doing so was very tedious. Audio editing is a great tool, but through this project I learned the many challenges of it. I see how time consuming it actually is as you work toward that perfect cut and capturing the best sound. Spending hours in GarageBand cutting and dragging different clips to try and create the best narrative was a very patient part of this project. Luckily, throughout the process, we had the help of our peers, as well as Dr. Lamberton and Mr. Charles. This was really beneficial as we could get another ear on our project. In times where we may have just thought it sounded good enough because we were tired of editing, the extra ear was able to provide unbiased advice, helping the overall quality of the projects.

**Jill:** And here's Zach:

**Zach:** The final audio clip has about 20 different splits in it. The hardest part of it all was getting the audio to flow like natural talking. Sometimes, in between two



splits, there wasn't a long-enough pause, and it sounded choppy, so what I found, was finding his natural pauses in different parts of the interview and just squeezing it in between the clips. At one split, the pause wasn't enough, so I had to search the whole audio clip to find an "and," "um," or a "but," to have it sound natural.

**Jill:** I mean—thoughtful, if painful, editing choices; collaboration and tapping into a writing community; remaining faithful to the story even when you're tired of it and feel like quitting. . . . *It's all there.*

But I'll be honest and say that after we received the students' final drafts, Steve and I did find ourselves doing more editing before we were ready to post them on the website, especially in the first year of teaching the unit.

**Steve:** What particular challenges or pitfalls do we need to consider when doing this? Time! How much time it took on the back end. The first year, Jill and I both doing a lot of editing after the students.

**Rich:** The work on the back end is going to take more time than you expect in any given year. More so in the first year than any.

**Steve:** The second year, either it was just the guys had more familiarity with their program, the editing was stronger.

**Jill:** One of my comp-rhet mentors once told me, "I always have to teach something once before I know how to teach it." That was certainly true of this assignment. Part of the reason I think students' essays were closer to publication quality in the second year is that we were better able to articulate what we were looking for and what made a good Humans of Montgomery County audio clip. Students in the second year could also listen to the previous year's examples as guidelines.

But, again, even in the first year, our students' engagement with the project, and the community members' reports of the interviews, made us feel good about the work.

**Rich:** As far as the students go, I mean that, the ability to listen was immense in our students. To see those guys go through that process and really tune in to what was there, was impressive.

**Jill:** We feel pretty satisfied that, for the 30 or so people who participated in this project each year, we were able to complicate their impressions of each other. For Zach, who took the course as a first-year student while he was still finding his way at the college, the project had personal benefits:

**Zach:** Overall, I loved this project. The idea of extracting stories from people excites me. I'm a very quiet person, but, on an intimate level, I love to talk. The experience of this project has made me a better talker, listener, and audio editor. I'm quite sad to have this project behind me now because I would love to do another one.

**Jill:** Steve and Rich said they felt reinvigorated in their day jobs after spending time in the classroom and listening to the students' productions. Perhaps most gratifying, we were all reminded of the ways that storytelling and careful listening are still the building blocks of community.

**Rich:** I don't know how to properly quantify it, as to who got more out of this? To see the guys do so well and to engage in the project and sort of in the way that we envisioned was really rewarding.

**Steve:** Yeah. And as a storyteller, to watch them embrace it . . .

**Rich:** [*in agreement*] Oh!

**Steve:** . . . and watch them realize how rewarding this is and how cool this is, I found I really believed this stuff! Like, I really believe stories are really important.

**Rich:** What do you think the project did for the community members?

**Steve:** Well I *know*. I mean, I talked to several of them. It changed their perception of our students. A lot of the kind of stereotypes of what, certainly a male college student, is, fell for several of these people. Even people who kind of knew the college were surprised at their ability to sit there and listen. The idea that these guys came and listened and they were polite. You could tell that they wanted to hear the stories, so for that community member, it changed that perception. Also, it did what we hoped, which was it honored them. They felt honored. They felt like they mattered, because they *do*.

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