



Setting the Scene for Community-Based Learning: Creative Writing as a Platform for Inquiry and Integrative Learning

Adam Watkins
Purdue University
aewatkin@purdue.edu

ABSTRACT

Creative writing pedagogy has received a surge of critical interest of late, though much remains to be said about its capacity to support trans-disciplinary learning outcomes, such as those related to community-based learning. Through an assessment of a place-based course focused on community-based learning, this article provides evidence that creative writing assignments can be an effective learning tool for cultivating community engagement and intercultural competencies. The educational value of creative writing, this study shows, has much to do with its unique mode of inquiry, which is well suited for integrating diverse perspectives, multi-modal research, and multiple ways of knowing.

INTRODUCTION

The present study focuses on the ways in which creative writing can be used to support community-based learning, though it also addresses a larger question about creative writing's capacity to promote transdisciplinary learning outcomes.¹ Such questions have yet to be answered because creative writing scholars are just now beginning to ask them. As was noted by Donnelly (2011) and others a decade ago, creative writing has been “a field that avoids scholarship” and demonstrates a “resistance to reform” (1, 2), with this lack of pedagogical attention proving lamentable given creative writing's popularity among students (Healey 2009, 30). Students are showing up to the creative writing classroom, but have educators fully recognized what students can get out of it?

If traditional and unresearched approaches to creative writing instruction “remain core to the

¹ The term “transdisciplinary” is commonly used in relation to learning outcomes that transcend disciplinary contexts and has been employed in relation to the learning outcomes identified by AAC&U as part of the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative (see, for instance, the Creative Thinking VALUE Rubric) and in the context of writing studies (see, for instance, Scott & Pinkert, 2020).

identity of our field, and have represented its trajectory for nearly a century,” as Clark, Hergenrader, and Rein (2017) suggest, then the recent outcrop of creative writing scholarship has indeed evinced “a shift in that trajectory” (4). While at times informed by the more established critical discourse in composition studies, the scholarship of creative writing has begun to develop its own pedagogical theory, to establish key pillars within its own “conceptual space”; this it must do, argues Tim Mayers (2016) in concert with Diane Donnelly, to “make its presence known” in the academic landscape (2). Parallel to the common view in composition studies of writing as a way of learning, creative writing scholars have begun to articulate how their own creative forms offer “radically different ways of asking and saying and knowing” (Pugh, 2017, 44; see also Runco, 2009). Essential here is a sense of how narrative, figurative language, and other formal tools can facilitate and shape thinking about a wide variety of topics and issues. Along with Alexandria Peary’s “The Pedagogy of Creative Writing across the Curriculum” (2015), the emergent scholarship has begun to reveal the versatility of creative writing as a learning tool, whether employed in connection with digital literacies, gender and critical race studies, ecostudies, and other fields and disciplines.

Creative writing that involves community-based pedagogy to promote civic learning provides one valuable inroad into this question about transdisciplinary outcomes. Over the last two decades, a chorus of scholars have championed civic learning as essential to the mission of higher education (Deans, Roswell, and Wurr, 2010; Grobman & Rosenberg, 2015, 2; Kezar, 2002, 15; among others). The effort to cultivate students into thoughtful, responsible, and engaged citizens by coupling academic study and community life has culminated, according to George Kuh (2008), in some of the most impactful learning strategies used today (11). The pedagogical commitment to community-based learning often coincides with a focus on transdisciplinary learning outcomes, such as those identified by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2007) as civic engagement, intercultural skill and competence, integrative learning, and inquiry and analysis. In the estimation of Carol Geary Schneider (2003), former President of AAC&U, community-based learning, inquiry, and integrative thinking are precisely the “three major themes” that have emerged “as keys to the newly engaged and practical liberal education for the twenty-first century” (8-9).

The effort to incorporate community-based learning into English studies has been well documented in critical collections – *Service Learning and Literary Studies in English* (2015) and *Writing and Community Engagement: A Critical Sourcebook* (2010) being a couple notable examples among many – as well as dedicated journals like *Reflections: A Journal of Community Engaged Writing and Rhetoric* and *Community Literacy Journal*. Creative writing scholarship has largely remained at the periphery of this conversation, however. Particularly unclear is whether creative forms of community-based writing can effectively promote the same outcomes associated with other forms of community-based learning.

Building on the sense of creative writing as a dynamic learning tool, I offer here a case study of an honors course that was multidisciplinary in its approach and in its enrollment. The course focused on the intersections of community, place, culture, and personal identity, and it utilized creative non-fiction projects alongside more common community-based learning practices to promote outcomes in the areas of civic engagement, intercultural competence, inquiry, integrative learning, and creative thinking. The transdisciplinary nature of the course, the various learning strategies, the multi-disciplinary student body – these aspects made this curricular context a valuable site for theorizing and researching creative writing’s capacity to promote transdisciplinary learning outcomes, the kind of outcomes that Kuh and Schneider deem essential for twenty-first-century students.

THE CASE IN QUESTION: *HOMEGROWN*

I initially designed *Homegrown* to improve students’ understanding of and connection with the local community.² The interdisciplinary course merges an array of theories and perspectives, including seminal work in anthropology, critical geography, urban studies, environmental psychology, psychogeography, among others. Three main learning strategies were adopted: city-as-text (CaT) walkabouts; creative nonfiction assignments; and a service-learning project. CaT is a type of cultural geography fieldwork championed in honors pedagogy. In this course, the four assigned CaT walkabouts involved interaction with local spaces and community members, along with 600-word reflections that required the integration of course concepts. The service-learning project involved a six-week storytelling workshop with a strong emphasis on place, which was delivered at a local community center to at-risk youth whose racial and/or class backgrounds were different from my students. In keeping with scholarship on best practices for intercultural learning through service, the duration of the project was prolonged, students worked cooperatively with community members, and students had ample opportunities for reflecting on their experience (Fitch, 2005, 189). Furthermore, students were guided in the application of class concepts to their service experience.

The creative nonfiction (CNF) assignments were intended to promote the same community-based learning outcomes as the other two strategies. Students were taught to use CNF not as a mode of personal expression but as a platform for inquiry and integrative thinking in relation to course themes. They were introduced to CNF that reflected course concepts, including D. J. Waldie’s *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996), Barrie Jean Borich’s *Body Geographic* (2013), and Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts’ *Harlem is Nowhere* (2011). These texts exemplify the ways in which personal experience, historical accounts, interviews, cultural analysis of related media, etc., can be integrated to develop a deeper and more complex understanding of a place and its people. They

² The pilot course was designed and implemented with the support of grants from the Purdue University Honors College and the Center of Instructional Excellence.

also offer instructive models for how formal choices can influence the ways in which authors work through diverse ideas and integrate different perspectives. Literary elements were often addressed in our discussions, with the focus falling on how they shaped the inquiry and analysis at stake. A handful of craft-oriented activities were implemented as well to familiarize students with CNF techniques – such as narrative, description, and dialogue – that lead to more detailed and nuanced depictions of place and people. Students first wrote a memoir about a place of personal significance, as a way to practice using key formal elements of CNF to support inquiry and integrative learning.

The final CNF project was a research-intensive exploration of some aspect of Greater Lafayette and the community that exists beyond the boundary of our campus. Excerpts from Michael Taussig's *My Cocaine Museum* (2004) were assigned to provide students with a model for integrating diverse research methods, perspectives, and writing styles. Set up as a textual other to the Gold Museum in Columbia's capitol city, Taussig's book offers "exhibits" on various themes that reveal the complex realities of Columbia's people, including the cocaine trade and mining as well as myths, places, and materials of local significance. Within each exhibit (or chapter), Taussig oscillates, paragraph to paragraph, from personal experiences, the stories of others, descriptions of cultural practices and beliefs, local practices, local politics, historical research, philosophical engagements with Friedrich Nietzsche or Walter Benjamin, etc. Based on Taussig's model, students identified and investigated an aspect of place that would provide a window into the complexities and nuances of Greater Lafayette. In addition to instructing them to utilize the formal elements of Taussig's model, the assignment prompt encouraged them to "[c]onsider including a short afterward" that indicated how the project influenced or illuminated their "sense of civic identity and civic engagement."

CONCEPTUALIZING CREATIVE WRITING AS A LEARNING PLATFORM

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the course, I chose to focus on transdisciplinary learning outcomes generally associated with community engagement: civic engagement, intercultural competence, inquiry and analysis, integrative learning, and creative thinking. I relied on the AAC&U VALUE rubrics to identify these learning outcome areas and selected competencies from the rubrics that were most relevant to this course. The VALUE rubrics were developed to articulate and assess learning outcomes in various educational contexts, including civic and community-based learning, and have been widely recognized for their efficacy (Finley & Rhodes, 2016; Hatcher, 2011; Fitch et al., 2013). Furthermore, they have proven useful tools for conceptualizing the learning at stake in humanities disciplines, including rhetoric and composition studies (Scott & Pinkert). This unique course model provided me a valuable opportunity to engage in precisely this kind of conceptualization.

To theorize creative writing as a learning platform for transdisciplinary outcomes, I took the

fifteen competencies identified for the course and explored their applicability to existent scholarship on creative writing practices and pedagogy. I bore in mind skepticism that exists among some composition scholars regarding the value of these rubrics in assessing student writing. As Kimball, Schnee, and Schwabe (2015) have illustrated, the VALUE rubrics can be “useful starting places” for developing assessment tools and help align local assessments with learning outcomes that are “part of a national dialogue”; even so, it is imperative, they argue, that these rubrics be employed in a way that highlights rather than ignores or obscures “the messy, inchoate, creative process and products of real learning and writing” (114, 118; see also Gallagher, 2012). To this point, I sought not to force creative writing theory into the compartments of learning outcome rubrics but rather to find places of alignment or resonance between them, as well as moments where the existing scholarship further articulated or expanded upon the kind of inquiry, creative thinking, integrative thinking, and community-based learning made possible through creative writing practices.

To start, I will present together the learning outcome areas of *inquiry and analysis* and *creative thinking*, as they mutually describe a process of discovery that resonates well with the exploration afforded by creative writing. Among other things, inquiry and analysis involves the ability to identify “a creative, focused, and manageable topic” of significance, as well as to “organize and synthesize evidence to reveal insightful patterns” (AAC&U, “Inquiry and Analysis,” 2009). Creative thinking involves extending novel questions, connecting and synthesizing ideas in novel ways, and “integrat[ing] alternative, divergent, or contradictory perspectives or ideas” in the process of creating new knowledge and understanding (AAC&U, “Creative Thinking,” 2009).

The notion that creative writing constitutes a form of inquiry – one that is uniquely exploratory, multivalent, and dynamic – has been a point of emphasis in recent scholarship. First, it is frequently described as more rhizomatic than systematic, such that creative works often “begin with inquiry, but the direction and order of questions and the kinds of questions posed might change throughout the process” (Donnelly, 2012, 127). The opening up of manifold lines of inquiry leads naturally to a second key attribute: creative writing’s accommodation of multiplicity and divergence. Not only can creative writing productively “collapse this polarization of the critical and the creative, and meld the two together in the same text” (Smith, 2014, 332; see also Hergenrader, 2017, 137), it can also incorporate knowledge from a variety of disciplines as well as myriad ways of knowing, including emotional, embodied, situational, academic, imaginative, perspective taking, etc. (Brewster, 2009, 129-30; Harper, 2012, 106; Jacobson and Larson, 2014, 180, 184; Runco 190-91; Smith 332; Van Oosterman et al., 2007, 564-65). In a variety of ways, then, creative writing allows authors to engage “several points of view” as opposed to “promoting a single argument” (Smith 332).

The multi-modal, multi-perspective aspect of creative writing differentiates it from other methodologies, lending it a unique capacity to avoid reductionism, assumptions of universalism, or

theorization out of touch with lived realities (Runco 180, 185; Brewster 127, 129; Jacobson & Larson 180, 182). Rather than collapse or reduce meaning, creative writing allows authors and students to make sense of this multiplicity by teasing out underlying patterns, identifying novel connections, synthesizing diverse ideas, or reflexively engaging multiple perspectives in ways that spark emergent moments of learning (Donnelly, 2012, 126; Harris, 2004, 403). This dynamic engagement with diverse ideas and perspectives is a salient feature of the ways of thinking and learning at stake in creative writing. It facilitates a synthesis of thought that is emphasized in the “Creative Thinking” rubric, as noted above, and central to integrative learning. For the latter, this synthesis involves combining experiential and formal learning as well as creating meaning by “combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field or study, discipline or perspective” (AAC&U, “Integrative Learning,” 2009).

The final step is to consider how this highly exploratory, creative, and integrative mode of inquiry might be leveraged toward community-based learning outcomes. Drawing from the AAC&U VALUE rubrics for *civic engagement* and *intercultural knowledge and competence*, I find the following competencies to be most applicable:

- Fosters interactions with people from another community or culture.
- Raises complex questions about another community or culture and develops answers that incorporate multiple perspectives.
- Demonstrates a nuanced understanding of a community or culture based on its members’ own sense of its history, values, politics, etc.
- Integrates academic learning with one’s own experience of community engagement in order to promote deeper understanding.
- Learns about one’s self, sense of identity, values, and attitudes through engagement with community members, cultural others, and/or civic life.

The pursuit of curiosity and complex questions, the critical approach to personal experience, the emphasis on the transfer of knowledge and synthesis of diverse perspectives – one can see how the outcomes of community-based learning overlap with the competencies of inquiry and analysis, creative thinking, and integrative learning just explored.

While the scholarship on community-based learning in creative writing pedagogy is sparse, recent literature on place-based creative writing has begun to articulate its value toward civic engagement. Following the pioneering work of David Sobel and Roger Brooke, Jennifer Case (2017) attests that “a prominent thread across the place-based pedagogies” is a “sense of local communities as a rich site for inquiry – one that can help prepare students to be better citizens” (50). Janelle Adsit (2017), Cathy Day (2017), and Trent Hergenrader (2017) have all recently described place-based

creative writing as a self-directed, unrestricted, and multi-modal form of inquiry, one that can involve a mixture of archival research, secondary scholarship, and engagement with place and community. As for intercultural competence, Kim Davis (2015) and Amanda Wray (2018) both affirm how the inquiry at stake in personal writing or creative nonfiction can lead students to investigate communities, to think critically about the stories of others, and, in the process, achieve meaningful outcomes in relation to intercultural learning. Their work aligns strongly with the discourse around community literacy in composition studies. In one particularly relevant essay, Higgins, Long, and Flower (2006) highlight how creative writing techniques can help students to “juxtapose alternative perspectives” more readily as they develop community stories that do not “absorb difference, contradiction and complexity” but reflect it (26).

Overall, the extant scholarship on creative writing offers numerous places of resonance and alignment with the transdisciplinary learning outcomes related to community-based learning. Its unique mode of inquiry encourages novel questions and exploration through multiplicity and divergence, and its various formal elements offer a dynamic framework for considering and integrating diverse ideas and perspectives. Examined in relation to the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, creative writing’s potential for promoting a nuanced understanding of communities and cultures becomes particularly evident, bringing our pedagogy into a national dialogue around transdisciplinary learning outcomes.

INVESTIGATING CREATIVE WRITING AS A LEARNING PLATFORM

In fall of 2017, I began to conduct a mixed-methods study of the *Homegrown* course under an exemption status from IRB and with the support of a Scholarship of Engagement Grant from Indiana Campus Compact. The assessment involved twelve students who completed the course and came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds across the humanities and sciences. The roster, like the curriculum itself, afforded a uniquely multidisciplinary context for pursuing my research questions. First, can creative writing effectively promote community-based learning outcomes and how so? Second, how do students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds perceive the effectiveness of creative writing as a platform for community-based learning? Addressing these questions through a mixed-methods assessment, my aim has been to answer a call made by Donnelly (2015) for more learning outcomes assessment in creative writing studies and to do so in a way that targets learning outcomes that transcend the discipline. Given the lack of creative writing assessment to date and the transdisciplinary nature of this study, some conceptual work was necessary to formulate an assessment program that made sense for this learning context.

My approach in this case study is informed by scholarship on community-based writing as well as the wider fields of composition studies, civic and service learning, and active learning. Adrianna Kezar, addressing service-learning outcomes assessment, argues in concert with others that traditional assessment methods “do not adequately capture student’s complex development,” while case studies and other approaches more attuned to the contexts and methods of learning “are more likely to embody the type of complex learning that higher education aims at developing” (19; see also Flyvbjerg, 2006). Relevant literature in civic learning and community-based writing assessment also espouses or models the need to develop mixed-method assessment approaches that are suited to the learning context (DePalma, 2012, 183-84; Gelmon et al., 2001, 50; Finley & Rhodes 304; Fitch; Fitch et al. 69).

To understand the dynamic learning at stake in community-based writing or civic engagement, a number of scholars argue for more empirical research on student work that is embedded in the course (Deans et. al. 8; Deardorff & Edwards, 2013, 169; DePalma 182). Assessments of course writing projects are particularly effective in this regard, as they provide “authentic evidence” of students’ efforts to “demonstrate their learning” (Finley & Rhodes 304; see also Fitch et al. 69-71; Kezar 19). According to Fitch, Steinke, and Hudson, course-embedded assessment tools “are most valid as indicators of higher order thinking,” and they go on to recommend “systematic processes” like the AAC&U rubrics, which provide multiple scoring levels and precise descriptions of performance (69, 71). Finley and Rhodes, among others, also suggest the use of AAC&U rubrics, but as a starting point, such that relevant competencies are selected and modified in the creation of assessment tools that are suited to the complexity and nuance of the given learning context or product (307-08; see also Kimball et al. 119).

Informed by the literature above, I developed a rubric for assessing community-based CNF that is based on the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section. What I refer to as the Creative Inquiry in Community Based-Learning (CICBL) rubric includes three scoring levels and defines performance criteria in ways that draw from relevant AAC&U rubrics, adapting or elaborating on them to synthesize related criteria from multiple rubrics and to reflect the collective insights of creative writing scholars. Building on the AAC&U rubrics, the CICBL framework follows a process-oriented model developed by Ulla Connor and Janice Lauer (1988) and utilized by Adrian Wurr (2012) to assess the quality of service-learning writing. This model delineates a three-stage reasoning process that starts with “Claim,” moves to “Data,” and concludes with “Warrant” (Wurr 427). The CICBL framework identifies a four-stage process that begins with *Opening Inquiry*, advances through *Engaging Multiplicity & Complexity*, consolidates via *Integrating, Synthesizing, & Organizing* and leads to a set of *Final Outcomes in Community-Based Learning*. This framework is not only useful in assessing various competencies but also in recognizing and analyzing the complex

ways that students can use CNF to move dynamically through the various stages of inquiry. To this end, I recorded in which paragraphs these competencies were exhibited, the number of times they occurred in each project, and instances where one or more competencies led to another. In total, 11 of the 12 final projects were analyzed in this manner.³ One project was not included in this research because it was submitted in an incomplete form and did not meet a baseline level of engagement with this learning tool. The 11 projects analyzed ranged considerably in length, from 2,400 to 5,000 words.

In addition to the CICBL assessment, I surveyed students to glean their perspectives on the efficacy of this CNF learning tool toward community-based outcomes. In a survey distributed electronically on the last day of class, all 12 enrolled students anonymously indicated the extent to which they agreed that each of the three learning strategies promoted the eight competencies selected from the VALUE rubrics for intercultural competence and civic engagement. The survey questions were based largely on the Value rubric language, with some slight modifications. A five-point Likert scale of agreement was used. Self-report surveys have been the most common assessment tool used in civic learning scholarship, though limitations to their value have been noted (Dear-dorff & Edwards 168; Finley & Rhodes 316). There is also precedent in service-learning scholarship for developing self-report surveys based on the VALUE rubric language (Mehta et. al., 2015, 50). Furthermore, the value of survey instruments that comparatively examine students' perceived efficacy of several learning strategies within a single course has been documented in scholarship on active learning (Lumpkin et al., 2015; Machemer & Crawford, 2017). In this case, student perceptions were recorded to see whether they complimented or complicated the results of the qualitative assessment.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF AUTHENTIC EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

Based on my analysis using the CICBL rubric, the “Greater Lafayette Museum” project proved an effective platform for community-based learning, particularly in terms of raising complex questions about unfamiliar communities. The average rubric score for articulating complex questions (1A) was 2.91 out of 3, with 10 of the 11 projects meeting the capstone criteria for this competency (see Table 1).⁴ Here are two examples of the complex lines of inquiry that students raised about the local community via their investigations into specific places:

- But at what point did [bookstores] transform into gathering places for book clubs,

³ Written consent was obtained to use students' writing in this research. In cases where individual student essays are referenced, pseudonyms have been employed.

⁴ The following coding system is used to designate instances where criteria in Table 1 and Table 2 are developed from one or more of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics: * - “Inquiry & Analysis”; # - “Creative Thinking”; ^ - “Integrative Learning”; ± - “Intercultural Knowledge & Competence”; § - “Civic Engagement”

Table 1, *Creative Inquiry in Community-Based Learning, Stages 1, 2*

Capstone (3)	Milestone (2)	Benchmark (1)	Avg Score
Stage 1: Opening Inquiry			
1A. Articulates creative, focused, and complex questions about unfamiliar communities / cultures. *#±	Articulates manageable, meaningful questions related to unfamiliar communities / cultures. *±	Articulates superficial questions related to a community / culture. *±	2.91
1B. Consistently raises new questions or lines of inquiry that meaningfully enhance or complicate the inquiry.	Raises new questions or lines of inquiry that occasionally enhance or complicate the inquiry.	Adheres to initial inquiry without exploring complications or alternative perspectives.	2.82
Stage 2: Engaging Multiplicity & Complexity			
2A. Effectively uses alternative or divergent examples to examine diverse aspects of the community / culture from divergent perspectives.	Through multiple examples relevant to topic, engages multiple aspects of the community / culture from multiple perspectives.	Includes a couple examples that reflect a few aspects of community / culture.	2.64
2B. Meaningfully engages four or more modes of investigation to produce diverse types of knowledge.	Effectively engages two or three modes of investigation to produce diverse types of knowledge.	Struggles to engage more than one mode of investigation to produce diverse knowledge.	2.64
2C. Engages numerous members of community to explore alternative, divergent, contradictory perspectives.	Engages a few (3 or 4) members of community with some divergence of perspective.	Struggles to engage members of community or explore diverse perspectives.	2.45
2D. Engages four or more academic sources from class / research that reflect three or more fields of study.	Engages 2 to 3 academic sources from class / research that reflect a couple fields of study.	Struggles to engage academic sources that reflect more than one field of study.	2.64

Table 2, *Creative Inquiry in Community-Based Learning, Stage 3, 4*

Capstone (3)	Milestone (2)	Benchmark (1)	Avg. Score
Stage 3: Integrating, Synthesizing, & Organizing			
3A. Synthesizes alternative or divergent examples, facts, and/or theories from more than one perspective, discipline, and mode of investigation to create complex ideas. #^	Connects alternative examples, facts, and/or theories from more than one perspective, discipline, and/or mode of investigation in an exploratory way. #^	Includes alternative examples, facts, and/or theories from more than one perspective, field of study, or mode of investigation. #^	2.91
3B. Meaningfully synthesizes academic learning with engagement to deepen understanding of community /culture. ^§	Makes relevant connections between community engagement and academic learning. ^§	Identifies knowledge from academic learning that is relevant to community engagement. ^§	2.73
3C. Uses elements of form to organize, juxtapose, or shape information in ways that reveal meaningful patterns, connections, or contradictions.*	Elements of form are used to organize information in ways that occasionally reveal meaningful patterns, connections, or contradictions.*	Elements of form are used, but do not organize or shape information in a way that generates or clarifies meaning.*	2.55
Stage 4: Final Outcomes in Community-Based Learning			
4A. Articulates complex answers to initial questions about communities / cultures that integrate diverse perspectives, fields of study, and modes of investigation. ±#	Seeks out answers to initial questions about communities / cultures by engaging multiple perspectives, fields of study, and modes of investigation. ±#	Articulates superficial answers to initial questions that demonstrates low levels of interest in unfamiliar communities / cultures.±#	2.73
4B. Articulates a nuanced understanding of community / culture(s), based on numerous, divergent members' sense of its history, values, spaces, etc.±	Articulates an adequate understanding of community / culture(s), based on several, members' sense of its history, values, spaces, etc.±	Demonstrates a superficial understanding of community / culture(s), based on members' sense of its history, values, spaces, etc. ±	2.18
4C. Articulates evolved sense of civic commitment or changes to own beliefs, values or biases. ±§	Demonstrates some changes in sense of civic commitment or own beliefs, values, or biases.±§	Through community engagement is able to identify own beliefs, values, or biases.±§	2.55

children, and families? To what extent are bookstores a reflection of their surrounding community, and how effective are their involvement initiatives with different populations . . . These questions, among others, propelled my investigation of the layered relationship between chain and independent bookstores and the Greater Lafayette community. (Josie)

- As staples of a community, the library serves as the social and intellectual hub of a place. These buildings seem to have a cut and dry framework of how they should operate, but how much can be learned about their respective communities, and Greater Lafayette in general, just from looking at these two libraries that are in such close proximity? (Sam)

Like these two examples, most students identified their place-based topic as a lens through which to learn about surrounding communities and cultures.

In addition to providing an effective platform for raising complex questions, this CNF project also allowed eight of the 11 students to develop complex answers that reflected diverse perspectives, academic disciplines, *and* modes of investigation (4A), meeting the capstone criteria for this competency (Table 2). The other two students developed less complex but still meaningful answers. Students' success with developing complex answers had much to do with how they used the hybrid CNF form to engage multiplicity and integrate ideas. The 11 projects had an average rubric score of 2.64 for effectively using alternative or divergent examples (e.g., various bookstores, libraries, or historical businesses) to investigate different aspects of the community (2A). The projects also averaged a rubric score of 2.64 for effectively using multiple modes of investigation to facilitate diverse ways of knowing about the community (2B).⁵ Impressively, 10 of the 11 projects consistently demonstrated meaningful synthesis of diverse information or ideas from multiple community perspectives, academic disciplines, *and* modes of investigation to create complex ideas (3A), a behavior that was enacted seven times per project on average.

One of the more interesting tendencies highlighted through this analysis was the non-linear form of inquiry facilitated by the learning platform, which evinced the rhizomatic process noted by creative writing scholars. Students did not proceed in a linear fashion from initial questions, to multiplicity, to synthesis, to final conclusions. Instead, they often cycled back through the inquiry process, posing new questions or otherwise raising new lines of inquiry throughout the project. The average rubric score for raising new lines of inquiry was 2.82. Nine students consistently did so in a way that meaningfully enhanced or complicated their initial inquiry. On average, students raised new lines of inquiry in their projects 6.4 times, 4.4 of which proved meaningful. These new lines

5 Aspects of the community include history, values, politics, economics, practices, beliefs, identity, spaces, material culture, demographics, well-being. The first six aspects, like the competency at stake here, are borrowed from the AAC&U VALUE rubric, "Intercultural Knowledge and Skills." The last five were added to account for other aspects of a community or culture that are commonly invoked in research on place and community.

of inquiry resulted from their engagements with multiplicity – a new example (1.9 times), a new academic idea or fact (1.9 times), or a new community perspective (3.5 times) – or from the synthesis of this multiplicity into complex ideas (2.5 times).

To see this dynamic form of inquiry in action, and more fully recognize its potential for learning, I want to turn to a successful student example. For Trish, the Greater Lafayette project proved an opportunity to explore ethnic restaurants and “the diverse ways in which restaurants help to establish identity, community, and a sense of belonging.” Trish chose to structure her museum around four sections, each one dedicated to a different restaurant. The first section, which focused on a local eatery with a strongly multicultural clientele, established and explored initial ideas about diversity. Trish interviews one woman who opines that too much emphasis is placed on people’s differences, rather than just seeing people as individuals. Trish expresses some agreement with this sentiment at first, but then reflects further on the value of diversity articulated by the eatery’s owners and one of the employees. In these discussions, the focus shifts slowly from the inclusive space of the eatery to its embeddedness in the local economy. The question around diversity, and the importance of recognizing difference, is deferred. Still, Trish has already engaged divergent community perspectives (2C), as well as various aspects of community and culture (2A), and as a result she is beginning to think about the relationship between restaurants and communities from multiple angles.

In the next section, Trish focuses on a restaurant that serves street food from the place of her own ethnic heritage. The new example allows Trish to explore the idea of diversity in a different light (1B), as the personal connection allows the meaning of this place to resonate with her more fully. Leveraging multiple modes of investigation (2B), she provides a lush, cozy description of the restaurant’s sights, sounds, and smells; identifies the cultural significance of the décor; and then offers a quotation from an interview with a fellow student who claims that being in the restaurant is like being back home. In the next paragraph, Trish takes this idea and theorizes it by integrating Edward Relph’s discussion of place associations and the formation of cultural identity with Gaston Bachelard’s articulations of memory, home, dwelling, and belonging (2D, 3B). A complex idea is emerging (3A), one that Trish compounds across the next two paragraphs through more community perspectives (2C), details of the site (2B), and references to academic ideas (2D). She then concretizes her emergent recognition that this restaurant “is a representation of identity, and its presence establishes a sense of place and belonging” for the ethnic community in question.

Yet, the section ends with a simple but divergent realization: the restaurant serves people from other ethnic backgrounds, too. The acknowledgement becomes a jumping off point for a new line of inquiry (1B), one that will add greater complexity and nuance to the original idea. In the next section, the new example of a Chinese restaurant allows Trish to reposition herself in relationship to the subject of inquiry. The first paragraph again offers a rich description of the site; however,

what Trish sees this time “seems utterly unfamiliar to me, but it helps to have [my friend] beside me telling me what all the different foods are. She seems genuinely happy to be sharing an important part of her culture” (2B, 2C). The rest of the section reinforces the initial idea of ethnic restaurants as a space for maintaining cultural identity but also develops – through scholarly sources (2D) and community perspectives (2C) – this new, emerging idea about ethnic restaurants as a means of communicating culture to others (3A, 3B, 3C).

Trish is positioned well heading into the fourth and final section, seeking one more example to affirm the concept she has just demarcated, only she runs into a major issue: there is no restaurant that provides a space of belonging to the African-American community in Greater Lafayette or communicates their culture to others. As Trish acknowledges in her conclusion,

The most difficult section of this was the African-American section for me, since I had no idea where to start. I’m glad I didn’t just give it up and accept this absence as just “the way things are,” because the history that it uncovered is really important.

Rather than ignore this example because it did not support her initial expectations, Trish remembered that the point was not to confirm a thesis but to explore new lines of inquiry as they arise (1B). After speaking with diverse community members about different community aspects implicated by this issue (2A, 2C), Trish learns that there used to be a locally-owned barbecue restaurant that provided a space of belonging for the African-American community, and she learns what it means for African-American residents that such a space no longer exists. Rather than undermine her inquiry, this complication to Trish’s original idea “more than anything else convinces me of the importance of a *place* to both individuals and the community.” Ultimately, her narrative reflects contradiction and complications, leading to a more complex answer to her initial questions (4A) and a much more nuanced understanding of the diverse local community (4B). Her beliefs about the importance of places for ethnic belonging have evolved, and so does she develop a more sophisticated sense of why it is important to recognize the diverse cultures and stories within a community, rather than see everyone as individuals (4C).

In charting this dynamic movement between stages of creative inquiry, another salient feature of this learning tool emerges: the unique way the project facilitates integrative learning. Eight projects met the capstone criteria for engaging academic sources from multiple disciplines (2D) and for integrating academic ideas successfully (3B). Seven projects met the capstone criteria for both competencies, and those projects averaged 5.9 moments of meaningful integration: where the inclusion of academic knowledge deepened understanding or concretized learning about the community. The other four had two meaningful moments each. More moments of meaningful integration afforded greater opportunities for creating complex ideas by synthesizing academic concepts

with community members' perspectives (4.4 instances to 1.25), synthesizing academic concepts with other ways of knowing (2.1 to 1.25), and/or synthesizing the concepts of multiple academic texts (1.3 to 0). The result, then, was not only more instances but also more dynamic and complex forms of integrative thinking.

Here again it will be useful to look at a student example to consider the unique quality of integrative learning at stake in these projects, not just the quantity. Like Trish's, Chris's project exhibited a more exploratory and less evidentiary engagement with academic sources. The first section of Chris's inquiry into public art in Greater Lafayette begins with a quotation from an academic historian about how public statues often represent the authority of a civic agent or ruling body. Yet, this notion does not integrate cleanly with the first example to which Chris applies it: a city-wide installation of large ceramic pigs thematically decorated by different community members to celebrate various community entities. Over the next three paragraphs, Chris moves to different examples of local public statues, getting community member perspectives on some and reflecting on how people engage with others. It is not until the end of the section that Chris returns to the idea of authority, now from a new angle, and more fully integrates it. Public statues "serve as a reminder to the community, as well as a celebration of it," she writes; "*For authorities*, it is much better for people to see themselves as part of the city than as outside of it" (my emphasis). Rather than abandon the idea of authority, Chris uses multiple examples and creative synthesis to transform the initial idea into a different understanding of the relationship between authority and public art.

Each of the next three sections offers its own cycle of inquiry, in which the idea of art and authority is explored in new ways, often through integration of other academic ideas. In one paragraph, Chris highlights through a scholarly source that public art is valuable precisely because it represents authentic community voices and then references the multiple community members who said that the function of public art was to elicit responses and create conversations. Yet, she then points out that the removal of public murals that align with social protest rather than civic boosterism poses a major complication to this notion. A more complex idea about art, community voices, and local politics has emerged. And this leads to an evolving line of inquiry that Chris will explore throughout the rest of her project: "Should the city be stopping conversations? Should the comfort of citizens take priority over the resolution of problems?" Chris ultimately weaves together diverse ideas that build toward a complex understanding of the relationship between public art and the local community, as well as more nuanced understanding of this community based on its members' diverse values, politics, and perspectives on material culture. This all results from the creative way she integrates academic knowledge, which exists not as proof but as an intellectual tool to be explored and manipulated.

While the CNF projects were by and large successful in developing complex answers and

integrating academic knowledge with community experience in a way that deepened learning, they were less consistent in demonstrating the two other outcomes for community-based learning represented in the fourth stage of the rubric. Only five of the 11 projects met the capstone criteria for demonstrating a nuanced understanding of another community / culture based on community members' divergent perspectives (4B). Three more were able to articulate an adequate understanding based on several community members' perspectives. This result was closely connected to students' success with engaging community members with divergent or alternative perspectives (2C). Six students did just that, interviewing 6.3 community members on average, with 3.2 types of divergence.⁶ The other five students interviewed 2.6 community members on average, with 1.8 types of divergence. For the first group, the increased multiplicity and divergence led to more instances where complex ideas were formed through the juxtaposition or synthesis of diverse community perspectives (6.7 to 2.4), more instances of meaningful integration of community members' perspectives with academic knowledge (4.8 to 1.4), and more instances where engagement with community members prompted new lines of inquiry (4.5 to 2.2). As such, I feel this learning tool has significant potential in facilitating a nuanced understanding of a community or culture (4B), provided students have sufficient time and motivation for interacting with diverse community members.

The importance of divergent community perspectives is evinced well in the projects noted above, as in several others. Another student, Kim, makes an important realization about local historical businesses due to engagement with the perspectives of community members from different racial backgrounds. This engagement leads her from a romanticized notion of how historical businesses signify tradition and belonging to a more complex understanding that such a sense of tradition and belonging does not necessarily extend to minority members of the community. For Josie and Sam, engaging owners, employees, and customers at different bookstores and libraries, respectively, provides each with a more complex sense of how these places accommodate various community needs and reflect community members' diverse values. And it is by recognizing the complex ways these establishments do or do not reflect diverse values, or do or do not meet diverse needs, that these students gain a more authentic and nuanced understanding of the larger, heterogenous community.

As for self-development through community engagement (4C), seven students met the capstone criteria by articulating changes in values, beliefs, or civic commitments explicitly in their projects. Here is one example from Melinda's project on local construction and its impact on community identification:

⁶ An example might help to clarify what I mean by types of divergence. Interviewing leaders from three different types of religious institution would be one type of divergence. Interviewing leaders and as well members would create a second type of divergence.

I discovered an incredible sense of pride from the local residents regarding their town My eyes were opened With my newfound appreciation for the Greater Lafayette area, I truly see this place as home. I have a new sense of belonging I hope to continue to give back to this community.

Sam's study of local libraries also led to explicit statements about her evolving values and civic commitments:

Through conducting this research, I was reminded of the importance of libraries This project influenced my sense of civic identity by reminding me to utilize and support the efforts of the community to support its own residents' growth.

Another three students were able to demonstrate, if not articulate, a meaningful change in their sense of civic commitment or their values and beliefs, leading to an average rubric score of 2.55 for this competency.

Overall, these students' success provides compelling evidence that community-based creative writing can be effective at leading students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to transdisciplinary learning outcomes. Seven students averaged rubric scores of 2.67 or better, with four meeting the capstone criteria for all 15 competencies. Every student asked meaningful questions about unfamiliar communities and sought out complex answers by engaging multiplicity, synthesizing ideas, and exploring new lines of inquiry. Integrative thinking that deepened community-based learning was also seen in each project, though more prominently in some than others.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

In response to the survey administered at the end of the course, students tended to agree that all three learning strategies had a positive influence on the eight community-based learning outcomes included (Table 3). (As noted above, the survey questions were based on the Value rubric language for "Intercultural Knowledge and Competence" and "Civic Engagement," with some slight modifications). In aggregate, the average scores for each of the three learning strategies were as follows: service learning, 4.75; creative nonfiction, 4.45; and CAT walkabouts, 4.3. The fact that students more strongly agreed, on average, that service-learning promoted their development in these competencies was not surprising: service learning has long been recognized as a highly effective strategy for promoting community-based learning outcomes. However, it was notable to see how well creative nonfiction fared in relation. On average, roughly half the students strongly agreed that the CNF assignments promoted their community-based learning outcomes, while the rest somewhat agreed.

Even more notable, CNF received the highest score for two of the eight competencies. In terms of asking complex questions about other cultures or communities and developing answers that reflect multiple perspectives, students rated CNF at 4.75, on average - the highest score for this competency and the highest score that CNF received across the eight competencies. This aligns well with the results from the qualitative analysis, which showed that students were most consistently successful with asking complex questions (1A) and articulating complex answers that reflect multiple perspectives, fields, and ways of knowing (4A). In the survey, CNF also received the highest score for integrating academic knowledge with community experience, tied with service learning. As noted above, the service-learning project was designed to be highly integrative, so it is notable that students equally agreed in the capacity of CNF to support this learning outcome. It is an

Table 3, Student Perceptions of Community-Based Learning Outcomes

Intercultural Knowledge and Competence	City-as-Text	Service Learning	Creative Nonfic-
I demonstrate a nuanced understanding of a culture or community, as defined by its own members' sense of its history, values, politics, communication styles, or beliefs and practices.	4.33	4.75	4.33
I am aware of my own cultural values, rules, and biases and recognize new perspectives about my own cultural values, rules, and biases.	4.17	4.67	4.58
I ask complex questions about other cultures and communities, and I seek out and articulate answers to those questions that reflect multiple perspectives.	4.50	4.50	4.75
I foster interactions with people from different cultures or communities, and I suspend preconceived judgments when valuing my interactions with culturally different others.	4.25	4.75	4.00
Civic Engagement			
I connect and extend knowledge from my academic studies to my engagement with the community or my participation in civic life.	4.33	4.58	4.58
Through community engagement I learn about myself in terms of my sense of identity and my commitment to public action.	3.92	5.00	4.42
I reflect on how my attitudes and beliefs differ from those of other cultures and communities.	4.33	4.92	4.33
I demonstrate curiosity about what can be learned from different cultures and communities.	4.58	4.83	4.58

interesting parallel that seven students strongly agreed that CNF promoted their integrative learning in the context of community engagement, while the qualitative analysis revealed that seven of the 11 projects met the capstone criteria for both engaging diverse academic sources and integrating them.

It is also notable where these students, in aggregate, were less certain of CNF's efficacy. In the survey, the lowest score for CNF came in terms of interactions with members of other communities and cultures, while developing a nuanced understanding of a community / culture based on its own members' perspectives tied for the second lowest score. This also aligns closely with what was revealed in the qualitative analysis, as several projects revealed low engagement with diverse community members, which then curtailed those students' success with developing a nuanced understanding of a culture or community. Overall, a meaningful pattern emerges by comparing students' perceptions of CNF's strengths as a community-based learning tool with the qualitative assessment of that learning tool and the authentic evidence it provided.

CONCLUSION

As evinced in this case study, CNF offers a dynamic form of inquiry that can lead to a more complex understanding of local communities and the relationship between places and people. For many of my students, it led to a deeper understanding of their civic identity and a much more complex understanding of Greater Lafayette, a place only as far as the edge of campus but which very few students had explored before taking this course. Overall, the CNF projects in this course brought students face to face with real cognitive challenges. They provided a flexible tool with which students could gather a multitude of perspectives and ideas, work through disorientation and contradiction, and work toward transformation. What better learning platform could we offer our students, as they head into the uncharted territory of the years to come? The highly integrative mode of inquiry afforded by creative writing does not need to be limited to community-based pedagogy and may prove highly advantageous for a host of other learning contexts and initiatives. Now, while the popularity of creative writing classes remains strong, is the time for educators to take stock of the transdisciplinary learning outcomes that creative writing can promote. Now is the time to recognize creative writing as a powerful engine for the learning outcomes most essential to higher education at large.

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