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Dissertation Summary for *College-Community Partnerships: Designing a Sustainable and Participatory Literacy Program* | hbrizee@purdue.edu

In 2000, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities reported that one of the most urgent problems facing American colleges was the disconnect between these schools and their communities. The commission recommended that land-grant and state universities "...renew the faith of Justin Morrill and Abraham Lincoln, the fathers of American public higher education..." by reconnecting with local populations (*Returning to our Roots: Executive Summaries*, 2000). Since the Kellogg Commission reports were published, many state and land-grant colleges have worked with local communities, and these efforts are illustrated by the learning, discovery, *engagement* formula found in colleges' strategic plans and mission statements.

Accordingly, rhetoric-composition and technical communication programs have used various approaches to help fulfill the Kellogg Commission's recommendations, including service learning and outreach. However, many writing scholars debate the success of service learning and outreach programs due to mixed results and inconsistent empirical research¹. My dissertation, *College-Community Partnerships: Designing a Sustainable and Participatory Literacy Program*, explores traditional approaches to service learning and offers an engagement methodology that uses discursive rhetoric, participatory design, and empirical research to foster college-community partnerships. This engagement model answers calls from contemporary scholars for more theory-driven, collaborative, and data-supported community-based research.

Chapter one frames the study by outlining institutional and discipline-specific challenges to service learning and outreach. Institutional challenges include the "scholarship hierarchy" where community-based research is "...dismissed as service, which is lower in the hierarchy than teaching and research," the "funding hierarchy" where funding sources, such as the National Science Foundation, "...were not especially supportive of Community-Based Research," and the "journal hierarchy" where "...many of the traditional high prestige journals have published mostly traditional research, not Community-Based Research" (*University of Utah Report*, 2007). Discipline-specific challenges for rhetoric-composition and technical communication include mixed community partner satisfaction, mixed pedagogical impact on students, and inconsistent empirical research².

Ultimately, I argue that the methodology I developed and applied in my study, the Community Writing and Education Station (CWEST) engagement project, addresses the institutional challenges and discipline-specific shortcomings noted above. I assert that the theory-based model I used—a model based in Isocrates' discursive rhetoric—moves activist-scholars into participatory engagement, which compliments and expands upon traditional approaches to service learning and outreach. Building from the participatory design model developed by Ehn (1992), I then argue that civic engagement projects can be more sustainable and effective when scholars use empirical research to work with community partners to develop and revise resources, as well as track and assess outcomes.

Chapter two explores traditional models used for many service-learning projects, models based on theories by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. The chapter then examines the discursive approach I developed based on work by Isocrates, the teacher who opened the *first* school of rhetoric and philosophy in Athens. Using Dubinsky's article, "Service Learning as a Path to Virtue" (2002), as a springboard into my discussion of theory, I explain important philosophical differences between Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Isocrates and why Isocrates helps us develop a more collaborative and situated engagement model. I argue that the participatory methodology used for the CWEST project is well served by Isocrates' theories of epistemology (building knowledge), taxonomy (organizing knowledge), and performance (using knowledge and connecting actions to agency).

¹ Herzberg, 1994; Schutz and Gere, 1998; Scott, 2004; Simmons and Grabill, 2007.

² Herzberg, 1994; Schutz and Gere, 1998; Scott, 2004; Simmons and Grabill, 2007.

Chapter three explores contemporary theories of engagement and discourse theory beginning with Dewey (1954), Derrida (1982), and Habermas (1998) and then moves into recent rhetoric-composition and technical communication scholars who use theory-based methods for engagement (Asen, 2004, Simmons and Grabill, 2007). I frame these scholars using the epistemology, taxonomy, and performance formula I develop in chapter two, and I argue that using Isocrates in the participatory engagement model answers calls from current scholarship (Ornatowsky and Bekins, 2004) to integrate discursive and rhetorical theories into community-based research.

Chapter four presents the research methodologies and methods I used to apply and test my engagement model. I employed a mixed-methods approach³ that was influenced by Sullivan and Porter (1997), Redish and Dumas (1999), and Brice Heath (2006). I also developed participatory methods of composing online literacy resources with my community partners: the Lafayette Adult Resource Academy (LARA) (an adult basic education program) and WorkOne (a state employment agency). Through a series of interviews and observations, my research partner, Jaclyn Wells, and I worked with LARA and WorkOne to develop General Education Development⁴ (GED), ESL, cover letter and résumé resources. These CWEST resources were then posted to the Purdue OWL in a new engagement area: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/>. I incorporated usability testing to collect data on the resources and revise them. To measure the impact of the resources, I also collected participants' cover letters and résumés and distributed them to employers for assessment.

Chapters five and six present findings from my now completed research, which include community partners' histories, data on people using LARA and WorkOne, the organizations' success rates, as well as data on regional literacy and employment. Findings from the first round of usability research on the Web-based literacy resources showed that the CWEST site and its materials were not as usable as participants needed them to be. The second round of testing revealed that revisions to the site's navigation and content dramatically improved usability and participants' satisfaction with the literacy resources. Employers' assessments of the cover letters and résumés indicated that using CWEST resources had a positive influence on the effectiveness of the sample documents.

Chapter seven concludes the dissertation with my argument for a more discursive, collaborative, and empirical approach to service learning and outreach—participatory engagement. This model addresses institutional challenges to engagement because discursive approaches allow for closer collaborative spaces between organizations. The model also addresses the scholarship, funding, and journal hierarchies noted above because it integrates empirical research into the engagement process, which helps generate support for academic presentations and publications⁵. Moreover, participatory engagement addresses discipline-specific shortcomings in writing by offering empirical methods for activist-scholars, improving the chances of community partner satisfaction. The model also helps instructors integrate engagement into writing curriculum. I illustrate this point by explaining how I used my project to teach a technical communication course in fall 2008.

Ultimately, this dissertation project adds to the fields of rhetoric, composition, technical communication, public rhetorics and community-based research. The study will contribute important findings for instructors and administrators to help fulfill service-learning, outreach, and engagement goals at their universities while benefiting stakeholders involved with the civic projects.

³ A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods.

⁴ Tests used as the equivalent of a high school diploma.

⁵ The CWEST project generated \$5,100 in grants from Purdue University. Also, this study won the 2009 Janice M. Lauer Award for Excellence in Dissertation Work (\$500) and a Purdue Research Foundation Grant of \$16,795 for 2009-2010. The CWEST project has also generated multiple presentations at national and regional conferences and two publications.