ABSTRACT

TEACHING FOR RHETORICAL AND CIVIC TRANSFER: ITERATIVE DEFINITION BUILDING TO PROMOTE REFLECTION ON KEY TERMS

by Laura M. Tabor

This thesis proposes a pedagogical model of iterative definition building in the writing classroom. The study reviews how scholars of composition and rhetorical studies offer complex and flexible definitions that can help students begin investigating key terms of written communication. In order to propose a course where student definitions and re-definitions took the forefront of writing instruction, I surveyed students in the first-year writing course “Composition and Rhetoric” at Miami University. I asked students to define five key terms – rhetoric, writing, democracy, community, and citizenship – based on trends I had seen in composition literature such as the rising interest in public writing and community engagement. The surveyed students submitted definitions once in the beginning of the semester and once in the final week of the semester. Afterwards, the analysis was put into action as a course plan for a class called “Writing in Democratic Communities” which would value students’ definitions while also allowing them to reflectively modify their definitions as they moved through various course activities and readings. The project hopes to provide a process by which to turn any composition-class content area into a transfer-driven curriculum by creating pre-assessment surveys and scaffolded reflection activities that require students to apply abstract concepts to their current and future discourse communities.
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Dedication

To Scott, for introducing me to Rorty and always making me explain myself.
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The work of this thesis has been an experience of seeing and speaking about the world, to steal from Paulo Freire. To give words to underlying tensions in such a way that one can both affirm the work already done and suggest something useful for future practitioners is not easy, but it is what makes theoretical discussion so exciting. If this text accomplishes these things, it is due to the following people:

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Teaching For Rhetorical and Civic Transfer: Iterative Definition Building to Promote Reflection on Key Terms

By Laura M. Tabor

Chapter 1 – Defining “Iterative Definition Building”

The beginning of college stands out in my mind because I had no vocabulary for discussing many concepts about communication, despite my high level of interest in language. A first year course, Foundations of Human Communication, had me reading difficult texts about the history of writing, metaphor, and communication for the first time. This course introduced me to a vocabulary that I lacked, and then it asked me to think about the world in light of those new terms. The new terms I learned reshaped my understanding of the world. The instructor had us look seriously at how different texts would have us define terms like contingency, metaphor, communication, and truth, and as we read we were constantly revising our terms to fit the ever-more-complex contexts.

The instructor centered the class discussion around what we meant when we used particular words; to this day, I’ve never been asked to be so linguistically precise as I was in that course. However, the course did not demand that students have read a lot in the past. My personal experience, plus a lot of homework time, was enough for me to feel I was successfully grasping the philosophical concepts. Instead of feeling overwhelmed, I noticed how the definitions we were using in class became a kind of micro-context. It became a room where we knew the difference between particular theorists’ definitions of key terms, where those distinctions had meaning to a small community of learners who understood each other’s interpretations. This experience prompted my interest in creating a model of iterative definition building in first-year composition classes.

The first step in my model is a starting definition, or the first context in which a person encounters a word. One word commonly used in composition courses, rhetoric, is a great illustration of this first encounter. The word may enter one's vocabulary implicitly through hearing the term in contexts like “political rhetoric,” “mere rhetoric,” or “rhetorical
question.” At this point, a person may be able to use the word in a sentence but may not have a definition at hand. Thus, the first step in iterative definition building is asking students to define a given word as they currently understand it. The act of coming up with a definition of a key term based on the contexts in which one has heard it is an example of metacognition, where students think about the ways they have made meaning in the past and try to come up with explicit explanations of how that word works (Bawarshi and Reiff). This definition, now overt, can be a reflection point later in the process, to see how change has occurred, reinforcing the value that definitions can indeed change.

In definition forming outside the classroom, people continue to encounter the word in question after they have formed their starting definition. This definition-in-practice involves people either using or hearing the word and responding in conversation based on their starting definition. In an iterative definition building exercise, this would be a purposeful activity: rather than waiting for rhetoric, for instance, to come up in conversation, students would be given texts that engage rhetoric. As well, they would be asked questions in class discussion that get them employing rhetoric in sentences, testing out how they understand its meaning.

These experiences of definitions-in-practice lead to a reflective moment where students gauge the accuracy or effectiveness of their usage. In everyday life, this occurs when either someone explicitly challenges one’s usage or when a new usage is heard in conversation. Conversation and reading both require these reflective moments, as one either consciously or unconsciously accommodates one’s definition to continue communication. In iterative definition building, this process would often be overt, a set of questions in response to conversation and readings where students talk about how the texts or classmates are using key terms differently from their own definitions. This would be followed up with a question about how they might change their definition in response. These reflection activities allow students to see the impact of definitions on the world: the way we define words, after all, determines what we can do with them, and definitions are always developed in conversations and negotiated in local contexts.

1 for more on contextual formation of definitions, see Wan.
The result of this process is that people modify their own definitions to include new contexts and new flexibility. This happens every time someone checks the dictionary and discovers that they have been using a word differently than it has been traditionally defined; however, it also happens in much more complex contexts, where perhaps someone discovers that there is an offensive undertone to a word that they have only heard in neutral contexts. Iterative definition building encourages students to use dictionaries merely as starting points, because dictionaries don’t usually contain the local community context for a particular word and certainly cannot encompass the variety that exists in general usage. Instead, students are encouraged to add exceptions, qualifications, and nuances to their definitions based on a particular context. These definitions, especially for words like rhetoric, allow them to move away from the idea of one set definition of a word and into a multi-context understanding: what may be a useful definition of rhetoric in a first year writing class, for instance, may not be accepted when the student enters a public speaking class or a political science class. That is why the model is iterative: the new definition is only the beginning of a continual process of differentiation based on context.

Definitions hold a contested place in composition studies: while our understanding of language demands commonalities in order to have shared discussion, definitions also must be flexible to accommodate new worldviews and to solve disputes created in discourse. Scholars often mention the dangers of rigid definitions but less frequently discuss the problematic elements of implicit definitions, which do not give students a clear starting place for reflection. Composition classes thus must walk a line between not explaining enough for students to make meaning from our descriptions, and explaining so much that students take a new but rigid definition from us in a banking model of education (Freire). Straying too far toward rigid definitions limits students’ agency over their own meaning-making; straying too far to implicit definitions in the classroom means students ignore confusing conversations about words they don’t relate to meaningfully, which makes them fall back on past definitions and terms in order to cope.

I was drawn to exploring how students do and do not change their definitions of key terms over the course of a semester because of the way that my own first-year communication course modified my definitions in lasting ways. As it turns out, much research in composition and rhetoric asks the question of how first-year writing has an
impact on students, and how we can justify its place in so many liberal education programs in universities (Yancey; Bawarshi and Reiff; Beaufort; Bergmann and Zepernick). Scholars who do this research think about First-Year Composition’s (FYC) impact in terms of transfer, defined by John Bransford as "the ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts" (39). While definitions are certainly part of the potential transferable content in an FYC class, there was also the potential that students would merely continue using definitions from the past and not acquire or transfer new paradigms, employing what is known as “backwards-reaching transfer” (Perkins and Salomon). Common composition learning objectives such as audience awareness and critical understandings of genre require a knowledge of students’ prior understanding of key terms as well as some starting definitions from which to grow and complicate student and instructor understanding.

To address how definitions form and are transferred, the model of iterative definition building that I propose here is intended to be both a descriptive model of what language users already do, and also a pedagogical heuristic for designing course activities. The model draws on Kathleen Blake Yancey’s Reflection in the Writing Classroom and on Donald Schön’s Educating the Reflective Practitioner. Yancey discusses reflection in action, the constant evaluation and re-evaluation of one’s technique as new tasks are assigned, from the perspective of someone who wants students to transfer writing skills. Schön analyzes transferring technical practice to future situations of design in architecture, usually situations that do not correspond neatly to a particular classroom-taught skill. Both Yancey and Schön’s work have been convincing to me because they value students noticing their own problem-solving approaches, not merely learning a single set of skills. Their work privileges teaching practices that convince students that they can face future, unfamiliar situations, not merely apply skills to previously-seen circumstances. Thus, my model of iterative definition building is both a process that goes on unconsciously whenever a new word enters your mind, but is also a process that can be enhanced by overt discussion and metacognitive reflection in the classroom. Reflection-in-Action, Yancey’s and Schön’s term for thinking on one’s feet in an uncertain circumstance to apply all relevant prior knowledge, is deeply related to this process of definition building. Iterative definition building can help us to further our goals as compositionists because
definition building places students on a more equal linguistic playing field, demonstrates the instructor’s capacity to enact intellectual risk taking, and leads to reflective pursuit of action in contexts beyond the classroom.

Rigid definitions get a reputation for silencing difference and making things overly simplistic. Being forced to memorize a particular definition rather than being allowed to question and problematize received knowledge can make students disengage with the learning process (hooks; Seitz). Composition scholars like Ann Berthoff advocate student meaning-making in the process of writing, and offering a rigid meaning for any given word restricts this capacity. Composition instructors are now often champions of difference and advocates of critical thinking in the classroom space, which couldn’t be accomplished merely by teaching students a single set of definitions, especially if they are rigidly defined or bend to the dominant ideology of the era (Berlin). In contrast with rigid definitions, iterative definition building can actually help students to foreground difference and productively incorporate it into their complex definitions.

While definitions are often dangerous when they are rigid, what can be more damaging, if not handled correctly, is leaving all definitions implicit. When a group behaves as if they have a joint definition for a particular god-term, something like ‘global citizen’ or ‘critical thinking,’ then any students whose definitions are markedly different become actually silenced in the implicit demonstration of consensus (Wan). Many classrooms, for this reason, benefit from a collaborative discussion of key terms, with explicit attempts to come up with definitions as a class. Scholars of transfer of knowledge have pointed out that students apply definitions of writing terms to new writing situations better when they are explicitly asked to do so (Bransford; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). This explicit cuing for transfer can eliminate some of the implicit assumptions by making students articulate their views before and after a particular activity. In another vein, scholars of collaboration in the classroom also point out the importance of difference and disensus in collaborative writing, because without this emphasis the most dominant members often override some group members in collaborative projects (Trimbur). To use definitions effectively in the classroom, differences are foregrounded in a discussion of key terms, and instructors are able to set an expectation of diversity in definitions, not conformity.
Getting students to question their definitions is difficult, and early in a class experience it might be hard to generate much interest in an activity like definition building with students. Therefore, definition building gives instructors the opportunity to model the risky activity of advancing a definition for critique by giving their own definitions for the students to complicate and build upon. This is not an innocent move; it contains a power dynamic implicit in most higher education environments. However, it does show that the instructor is setting himself or herself up as an example of someone interested in receiving fair criticism, a role that we want our students to be able to inhabit. This is harmonious with the goals of student empowerment that are often attributed to Paolo Freire but also apply to many others in the critical pedagogy community including bell hooks, Herbert Kohl, and Joe Hardin. Their work does not seek to eliminate the role of the teacher, but rather to enable students and teachers to have productive conversations that make use of the knowledge and interests of everyone in the learning community (Hardin). For example, Ira Shor’s work on critical pedagogy discusses extensively how making himself vulnerable to student critique was one of the major steps for his students to take critical and active stances toward the course content and the world around them (Shor 103). Through this experience, instructors and students get to know each other in terms of their past experiences and the current texts of the class, in order to build robust definitions that incorporate the exceptions and qualifications that arise in critical inquiry surrounding key terms.

While students may initially define key-terms in ways that prevent them from participating in their surroundings, many college students begin searching for the “so what?” factor in their coursework. If they spend a class period producing or revising a definition of a key term, their reflections often turn to how they will apply this new term. Definitions ideally aim for something, always implying an *ought to be* rather than merely what *is* (Feigenbaum). Because definitions become most valuable when enacted in a small group to cause change, students would benefit from coupling iterative definition building activities with reflection on their own actions in local communities of discourse.

Students need not build definitions of community action from scratch; compositionists have long been interested in how to take learning out of the classroom and in how public writing happens. Scholars of civic engagement through writing have
produced complex, interesting perspectives on both the benefits and pitfalls of taking student writing public (Bacon; Cushman; Feigenbaum; Flower; Mathieu; Weisser; Welch). Advocates of ‘public writing’ in composition seek to get students talking about the ways that governments and citizens interact using terms like citizenship and democracy, and whether implicitly or explicitly, they start to redefine any uncomplicated notions students have about citizenship and democracy in the process. The related concept of “community” has been written about extensively in composition studies, as I will explain in chapter 2. Despite the unproductive vagueness of many evocations of community in the field (Harris), the term has such high circulation that it remains important to have students define what community means to them if we want them to take action within particular communities. By having students think explicitly about what they would want citizenship, democracy, or community to be, we set them up for a moment of choice, between continuing in their mode of operating up till now, and changing their actions to more harmoniously fit their ideal definition. A composition class, after the first round of definition building, can be space for working out their choices of action. FYC is a kairotic moment for students to define themselves as potential influencers in local communities because so many of them are just reaching adulthood (at least at institutions, like the context where this study took place at Miami University's Oxford campus). What better time is there than FYC for students to critically examine how writing grants them power in certain contexts and community spaces?

In this first chapter, I hope I’ve established why evolving definitions are a compelling part of a theoretically-informed composition course. Also, I’ve sought to argue how the model of iterative definition building I propose has been both informed by and can contribute to existing work on transfer of learning while also being relevant to the concerns of scholars of critical pedagogy and public writing pedagogy. While only a brief overview, this chapter offers a basic explanation of why we should pay more attention to definitions and the process of reflectively and iteratively building them in courses. It also presents briefly the study that I implemented in order to learn more about definitions as students currently see them in FYC.

To have a frame of reference for my analysis, I examined key scholarship in the field of composition and rhetoric that relates to my key terms: writing, rhetoric, community,
democracy, and citizenship. These definitions were drawn from scholarly literature but rather than an exhaustive look at definitions in the field, they represent an auto-ethnography of the definitions that have been provided to me as an instructor and that have been valuable in my own understanding of teaching English 111. Using these definitions, I propose ‘starting definitions’ to present as my personal definitions when facing students in the classroom. Along with these definitions I came up with heuristic questions to ask in class as steps typically taken in the definition building process, so that students will hopefully progress beyond my ‘starting definitions.’ These questions form the backbone of the assignments in the course I propose in chapter 4.

In Chapter 3, I switch from focusing on the field to focusing on the student definitions by examining the most enlightening and surprising results of my survey. I explore the word that had the greatest change from before to after, rhetoric, in light of how the coursework changes definitions successfully, as a starting example of how definition building can work. Afterwards, I discuss the more entrenched and less changeable definitions of the other four terms, and how exploring the variety in the outlying definitions may help them to become less stagnant in class discussion. Through these analytical moments, I nod toward future pedagogical choices that come from a broad view of the students who participated and their definitional work.

In Chapter 4, I outline a course centered on iterative definition building via detailed scaffolding plans and a rationale for how this course will be distinct from but dependent on other critical public writing courses (Feigenbaum; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak; Broffenbrenner; Freire). I draw on theorists both for pedagogical strategies and for examples of situations that students might face in future textual engagement with the larger community. In this way, students can practice in the classroom potential situations of engagement with non-profits and political action groups.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I posit, for future research, investigating the key terms of other composition focal points – environmental studies, critical/cultural studies, expressivist discourse – so that regardless of what content students focus upon, they will be able to spend time with their definitions such that they will be both memorable and applicable to future contexts. I will also posit ways the survey could be made more useful, employing my iterative process in much the same way that critical researchers revise for future studies.
Figure 1: Iterative Model of Definition Building With Key Terms
Chapter 2 – Triangulating Key Terms in Composition and Rhetoric Scholarship

In order to establish the terms selected for definition-building exercises – writing, rhetoric, community, democracy, and citizenship – it seems necessary to engage the way these terms are being defined in the composition and rhetoric literature. For writing, I looked to scholars who break writing down into its composite parts (Bawarshi and Reiff; Wardle; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). For rhetoric, I reviewed scholars who attempt to engage the long tradition of rhetoric to make accessible its practical uses for modern readers (Covino and Joliffe; Bitzer; Burke; Richards; Roberts-Miller). For community, I engaged a definitional divide that has emerged, where community sometimes is used in a similar way to “public,” and in other spaces is used to mean “the world outside the university,” with many other complications along the way (Harris; Warner; Fraser; Bacon; Mathieu; Wells). For democracy, I tried to look at the ways that democracy is a process that both yields problems and potentially solves those problems, drawing on public-sphere and democratic theory to give students a more complex but still hopeful view of democracy (Fraser; Dewey; Rorty; Welsh). Finally, I engage citizenship both on its level of inclusion and exclusion, but also as a call for individuals to critically analyze personal action and the wide range of forms of participation that the practice of citizenship can entail (Seitz; Wan; Feigenbaum; Welch).

The definitions of key terms I synthesize here are neither exhaustive, nor are they necessarily my personal definitions about the complex concepts conveyed. Instead, these definitions serve as pedagogical springboards into discussion, where students will be able to track how the definition changes throughout the semester to reflect the readings the classes have done and the projects they have undertaken. In addition, this is merely the first iteration of my own thinking on the subject. Students give me new ideas every time I teach, and so I expect for these ‘starting definitions’ to evolve every semester.

Writing

The definition of writing I employ begins from models forwarded by Anis Bawarshi and Mary Reiff, who show writing to be a construction that goes between subjects, termed a mediational means. “Mediational means,” they describe, “are the material and semiotic ‘tools in use’ that enable subjects to carry out their work” (96). Writing as a mediational
means in an activity system accomplishes two things: it establishes both a real subject as
author and a real subject as audience (even if the person is mediating his or her own
thoughts), and it means that context is important to the form and content of the work
(Bawarshi and Reiff). Writing, as defined by “pen marks on paper,” can be employed
without context or audience, but mediational means cannot. Here we see how this
definition seeks to find composite parts and integral elements of writing, not merely a
descriptive placeholder. This will be an important lesson for students, because we may not
change any students’ mind about how ‘writing’ is used outside the classroom, but it would
be possible to have them approach classroom and workplace writing with an eye to context
and audience.

Equally important for defining writing is establishing some of the boundaries,
including things that writing is not. Elizabeth Wardle resists the concept of a unified or
teachable “academic writing,” drawing on one of the elements of writing, “genre.” She
points out that “genres are context-specific and complex and cannot be easily or
meaningfully mimicked outside their naturally occurring rhetorical situations” (767).
Genres, then, are developed in particular discourse communities and do not cease to evolve
merely because they have become conventional (Wardle). Rather, writing is a group of
conventions for communication that is shaped by and shapes the community in which it
occurs. For this reason, Wardle sees first-year writing classes performing an analysis of
writing as a concept, much the way that my proposed course seeks to situate writing both
concretely and flexibly within a network of other terms. Her first-year composition course
would examine “how people use writing, how people learn to write, how genres mediate
work in society, how ‘discourse communities’ affect language use, how writing changes
across the disciplines” (784). What Wardle adds to our definition (which already valued
context and audience) are community-embedded concerns: not only does this activity
occur between an author and an audience, but it is impacted, in both content and form, by
the others who are speaking in the same conversations, locations, and topics.

Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak explain a few other important features of writing
that can have pedagogical value. They discuss some of the functions of writing, including
preparation for future writing, exploring topics, writing to collaborate, and “writing to
demonstrate academic competence” (28). Not all of these functions would need to be in a
‘starting definition’ but they could be supplemental material for a discussion later in the semester of the many ways that writing acts in the lives of students. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak see writing as something that improves with one's ability to talk abstractly about it, which contributes to transferability of writing skills: when students have what she calls "key terms as conceptual anchors" for the work they are doing, they are able to handle new writing situations with more ease by discussing similarities between past writing and this new context (42). Thus, when justifying all these parts of writing – functions of writing, context, audience, discourse communities – we can remind students that their ability to adapt improves when they have the language to talk about the adaptation process.

As I mentioned in the first paragraph, students may resist a new definition of writing at first: in casual conversation, it will still mean pen on paper. However, I believe starting the students with a definition like “an activity of communication between an author and an audience that is affected by time, location, other speakers and writers, and conventions of a particular genre” can establish a set of critical thinking expectations for the semester. I would present this definition only after a collaborative definition-building exercise that involved some heuristic questions: When, how, and why have you written in the past? Who does your writing affect? Who and what affects your writing? From these questions, I believe the student answers will grow into a definition that is similar in content and complexity to the one I mentioned here, and it would gain momentum as it is re-applied in reflection activities throughout the semester.

Rhetoric

Where students often come into the first year classroom already thinking they know exactly what writing is, there are often many students who have no frame of reference for rhetoric as a field, having only heard “rhetoric” used as an adjective in “rhetorical question,” or as the political pejorative “mere rhetoric.” For this reason, instructors have an excellent opportunity to shape the student’s understanding of rhetoric apart from simple negative values and into something distinct from but related to writing in a productive way.

Covino and Joliffe complicate rhetoric in their aptly named piece “What is Rhetoric?” by terming it “a primarily verbal, situationally contingent, epistemic art that is both philosophical and practical” (5). Here we find some of the elements that connect rhetoric
to writing: it is still dependent on context and it does create meaning. Meaning-making can sometimes be difficult to describe to students, but I believe it is tied to discourse communities, and students will understand that what works in their communication at school conveys something very different at home. Teaching students about how meaning doesn’t ‘exist out there in the world’ and wait for us to describe it may be an interesting entry point to the discussion of rhetoric and how we as humans have constructed our rhetorical framework for various community contexts.

Covino and Joliffe establish a view toward rhetoric when they succinctly define it as “the study and practice of shaping content” (4). This definition leaves space for rhetoric to apply to both the acts involved in communicating and a meta-analysis of said communication. It’s important to help students to see rhetoric as not merely in a dichotomy between bad and good, but rather as a situation where we can analyze effects of particular language in use through studying those language choices. While many are quick to emphasize only the good or only the bad elements of rhetoric, my belief is that students can see rhetoric as distinct from writing because it is specifically attuned to conscious and unconscious elements of persuasion, both the creation of them and the evaluation of them in the communication of others.

In addition to teaching rhetorical meaning-making, I would draw upon Covino and Joliffe’s wider investigation and have students discuss and grow accustomed to kairos, persuasion, argument, the rhetorical canons, as well as the three common rhetorical appeals (10). Another framework often cited in first-year composition is that of Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation.” Bitzer looks at context through a particular lens so that we can see the kinds of pressures exerted by location, culture, and history upon the words we speak (Bitzer). While his construct of exigence, audience, and rhetorical constraints is elegant for analysis, I personally prefer to also incorporate Kenneth Burke’s pentad (scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose) and the ratios between them for determining motive and ascribing arguments within rhetorical analysis (“Grammar”). I find that student answers to questions about exigence and constraints are complicated and improved by having the pentadic vocabulary to work with. All of these terms are part of what we mean when we discuss rhetoric and are useful for students to have a vocabulary in the genre of rhetorical analysis.
Regardless of what frameworks are used to describe the many parts of rhetorical analysis itself, I believe teachers need to spend substantial time engaging with students about the value and definition of rhetoric, beyond the genre of rhetorical analysis. For this reason, I believe rhetoric needs to be more than “the study and practice of kairos, persuasion, argument, ethos, pathos, logos...” because such a definition gives us key terms without key motivation. For this reason, I favor two other definitions: that of I.A. Richards and of Patricia Roberts-Miller. Richards dubs rhetoric “the study of misunderstanding and its remedies” (3). Rhetoric is obviously many other things, but this slice of definitional emphasis points out that we don’t bother caring about rhetoric when everyone involved is satisfied with the communication. Only when we are prompted to become critical by some slippage of meaning or confusion of motive do we turn to such rigorous analytical tools as are available to us in rhetoric. Richards’ definition of rhetoric as the study of misunderstanding can help us develop a Burkean “comic lens,” meaning that from the beginning we are seeing others and ourselves as mistaken rather than evil (“Attitudes”). While the definitions of rhetoric I discuss here are by no means exhaustive, I believe that students benefit from both an understanding of why rhetoric matters, when we employ it, and the initial comic lens.

When students find a text that they believe is unproblematic, however, I.A. Richards’ definition no longer helps them to find a reason to analyze, so I want to add a nuance from Patricia Roberts-Miller’s book Deliberate Conflict. At the end of her advocacy for more argumentation education, Roberts-Miller says, “The task of rhetoric is to argue for the value of those things to which we are not currently paying attention” (222). With this addition, I believe the definition becomes mobile; it means that when students see something going on in a text that no one is questioning, they can question it in order to bring attention to its power and meaning.

As students begin the semester, I believe they need a definition of rhetoric that points out why it is worthwhile to study genres like rhetorical analysis. As we build our definition, we will use heuristic questions like: why should we examine communications closely? When do we care about reexamining and critiquing communication? What do we hope comes from this process of evaluation? The course I propose in chapter 4 would encompass the complexities of a starting definition like, “rhetoric is the study of
miscommunications and communication that is not noticed or taken seriously, in order to draw more attention to it and hopefully remedy whatever problem is found there.” While students might not arrive at my definition, I think that having a definition like this is an important precursor to discussing the terminology with which we rhetorically analyze texts. In this way, students can use reflective activities to imagine future contexts where they might have to analyze disciplinary communication carefully.

**Community**

Community, it has turned out, is the term by which all the other terms in my work can be hung together, which is no surprise given how often “discourse communities” are discussed in composition studies. It is also no wonder, then, that this term has also become an important aspect of composition and rhetoric’s history and current culture. In 2015, the first ever Conference on Community Writing gave a call for proposals and received ‘hundreds’ more proposals than they anticipated (“Conference on Community Writing”). I don’t think this was just because the conference was being held in Boulder Colorado; I think that the field is in deep conversation with and about this word. Students deserve to know what they mean and what we mean when we say community, and have useful connections among community and other terms, notably “public.”

Joseph Harris famously complicated our fields’ evocations of community in his 1989 essay, pointing out the role of community in our discourse as being “warmly persuasive,” a word that constitutes a positive group, not merely a group (12). He’s also quick to identify that writing is deeply involved in the quest for the meaning of community: “we write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say” (12). Harris worries that this word is thrown around, and because it doesn’t always have a clear definition but nevertheless implies insiders and outsiders, it can create hierarchies that silence or privilege particular people and ways of writing (15). He notices the place-based metaphors used to show students “moving” from one discourse community to another even though it is more accurate that they add to and complicate their language by “repositioning” themselves in relation to many different discourses (19). Harris concludes that words like “discourse, language, voice, ideology, hegemony” would be better used to
refer to the overarching concerns of groups that would otherwise be called things like “the composition and rhetoric community” or “the liberal arts community.” Instead, he advocates that community be used for only extremely specific and local groups: “the daily struggles and mishaps of the talk in our classrooms and departments, with their mixing of sometimes conflicting and sometimes conjoining beliefs and purposes” (20). From Harris we arrive at a definition of community that is always local, with words like “discourse” and “language” to refer to the less interactive, more imposing backdrops that, nevertheless, exert power on our experiences.

Because of Harris’ article as well as other critiques of community as an overly vague concept that can erase dissensus, composition scholars have increasingly employed the term “a public” to encompass some of the qualities that could also be attributed to “a community” in other contexts. Theories of publics emphasize the nature and movement of groups rather than focusing on the feeling that is evoked when a group comes together (Habermas; Fraser; Young; Weisser). While many scholars advance nuanced notions of publics, I think specifically of the list of qualities of publics which Michael Warner elaborates in Publics and Counterpublics as useful for students; Warner discusses a public as “a space of discourse” that is a collection of “strangers” (67, 75). Discussing how writing creates the feelings that are developed in communities, and that without those linguistic ties the members would merely be strangers, can be a productive way to get students thinking about the composition of communities in addition to publics. Warner goes on to articulate how various qualities constitute “tests of membership” for publics, and that new texts address publics only “when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated” (75, 87). These qualities of publics allow a definition of community to address the heuristic questions: what determines membership in this particular community? What are the many texts that are implicitly referenced whenever a text is used in this community? These terms allow students to more accurately and deeply analyze the communities around them, with less of a vague warmth connecting the members and more of a process, history, and language that can help them look critically on future communities (or publics) that they wish to enter.

Warner’s concept of counterpublics also becomes an essential element as students move from analyzing into critiquing communities: counterpublics form in response to an
inability to or lack of interest in joining another public, and as a result, “a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one” (119). Here students would find a natural transition point from their positive associations with communities into a more critical stance where they begin to ask what counterpublics exist in relation to their current communities? How are some communities they participate in potentially already counterpublics? Warner’s delineation of publics and counterpublics allows students to use community in a productive way by interrogating the origins, circulation, and interrelations between them.

While these interrelated definitions of communities and (counter)publics all allow for looking at local groups in complex ways, there is a major use of ‘community’ in composition and rhetoric that I want to address, because the course I’m creating will ask students to consider that context. Authors writing about ‘public writing’ often invoke “the community” to mean “the space outside the university,” as an oppositional term where the constant thread is that things operate differently outside of academic models. An extensive literature has been developed about ‘public writing,’ (Wells; Welch; Weisser) ‘community service writing,’ (Bacon; Cushman; Herzberg; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters) and ‘writing with community partners’ (Mathieu; Flowers). This literature has established a few important questions about the communities that students may enter while still thinking in the academic context: Nora Bacon discusses how much steeper the learning curve is in community-service writing contexts, citing an example where a community partner requested that a service-learning student write a document that seemed self-explanatory but actually posed significant challenges to the student writer: “She was unfamiliar with her genre, barely acquainted with her topic, and uncertain about her audience and purpose. The coordinator had chosen this task thinking it was easy and had loaded the student down with information about the agency; but... there was no way to really prepare the student to do the writing in a few weeks’ time” (Bacon 52). Here we realize that students must not only be given information about the work going on in ‘the community,’ but also have time and space for evaluating the genres, audiences, and purposes involved – this requires time and perhaps a low-stakes analytical writing project before the usable writing for community partners ever occurs. The definition of community as “outside the university” is
an important one for students to recognize and appreciate as no longer subject to many of the rules and ways of operating that they have grown accustomed to.

Paula Mathieu points out that when ‘the community’ is involved, the need for reciprocity in a cooperative project, is to benefit both the student and the organization. She says, “Too often faculty show up on their [community partners’] doorstep after they have an agenda, after defining a project, a class, or a research idea. When academics enter a scene already carrying an agenda, they may fail to acknowledge and genuinely interact with people as individuals and instead view them only as a means to an end” (63). For this reason, students can be involved in questioning whether a planned project is truly benefiting ‘the community’ by their own standards, and whether the constraints of the university context are going to negatively impact the community organization. Mathieu advocates, in addition to or before moving into the community to write, that students spend time “studying literacy practices of local communities outside academic communities for important lessons about the way people use and interact with writing” (119). Thus, both the understanding of writing and the understanding of ‘the community’ can grow more complex and situated in local contexts through this consideration of reciprocity.

Finally, scholar Susan Wells calls for the field to answer the question “What do we want from public writing?” This is a question that we could turn to with students who are interrogating community in class. What do the students want to be able to influence? If they are reluctant to have such an influence, what kinds of writing will they be required to do as part of their membership in various communities? Wells’ hope to neither overstep the limits of what a writing course should be, and also not to teach students irrelevant genres, requires both instructors and students to critically analyze the impact they want to have, and to develop course outcomes around those goals (397). This requires an acknowledgement, once again, of the tests of membership, textual circulation, and counterpublics that determine the communities in which the students participate. Wells’ work interrogates writing that tries to be relevant to ‘the community’ by thinking about the classroom context and what we can reasonably achieve during semester-long bursts of participation and involvement.
Thus, I believe “community” merits at least two starting definitions with students, which is a valuable reminder that many words have multiple non-overlapping definitions, and that we have to acknowledge that in our discourse. I would probably distinguish by talking about a community or naming a particular community (the Miami University community, for instance) with the definition “a group, brought together by a common circulation of texts and specific ways of speaking and writing to each other, that requires certain tests of membership which determine who is part of that group and to what degree.” On the other side, I would refer to “the community,” as “the many groups and organizations outside of this particular university context where you may have to question your understandings of community in order to understand the dynamics at work.” These definitions will still be built through processes of inquiry about the students’ own communities: who is in your community and why? How does that community situate itself with or against other communities? What texts form important parts of your shared experience? These same questions can be used to investigate ‘the community’ when students begin studying experiential learning circumstances, getting to know a community partner organization and figuring out what their role would be with regard to discourse acquisition, reciprocity, and personal goals of involvement. This work, however, can be done using instructor-gathered resources and the Internet or it can be done through actual service-learning experiences outside the classroom.

**Democracy**

Democracy as a form of government is plagued by a variety of definitions: to some it connotes freedom, while to others it involves majority rule, representative government, or the ability for everyone to have a say. These many definitions, sometimes conflicting but always confusing, contribute to students’ customary vagueness when confronted with pedagogical goals of becoming “citizens in a democracy” (Berlin 131). For this course, I seek to use a small selection of theorists about democracy in order to help students understand the dynamics by which many communities function. For this reason, the course I’m developing is tentatively called “Writing in Democratic Communities.” In the context of the course title, the definition is simple: democracy is a way to exercise power within and as a group that requires words and persuasion rather than force and violence. I will use
theorists to discuss the problems that plague this seemingly simple system, and to find potential solutions to those problems. However, the most important quality of democracy is already there in the definition; I am not teaching students that violence is an option when words fail to accomplish action. When violence is authorized, democracy turns into its opposite, totalitarianism, where all means are available to those who have power (Welsh).

Theorists frame the problems of democracy in different ways, but almost all of these theorists have interesting options for scaling their concerns up to national government or down to families and small local groups, even if the questions must be modified. For instance, Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* has despaired of democracy ever producing a *well-informed* decision-making body: he advocates that the decisions are be left to experts who understand the situations and who distance themselves from the result, “not caring, in his expert self, what decision is made” (205). John Dewey responded with the book *The Public and its Problems*, not to disagree that well-informed decisions are good decisions, but to remind Lippmann and others that democracy becomes totalitarian when only experts exercise power. Dewey points out that “democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself” (148). Rather than blaming people for an inherent inability to make decisions, Dewey encourages society to reclaim a sense of itself at the local level that will allow people to make decisions democratically based on what they are actually well-informed about: local contexts (Dewey). He worries that people are distracted by the 'machine age,' which is certainly an ever-present threat to local community discourse in contemporary times just like it was when Dewey wrote in the 20s. However, he holds out hope that democratically-made decisions are possible and more beneficial than totalitarian top-down decisions. In this way, we can look at the points made by Lippmann and Dewey as ways for students to notice both the impediments to good decision-making that face them in their communities, and the positives that come from having decision-making processes that continually seek to have wider participation. Dewey calls the problem of the public “the essential need [for] improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion” (208). He advocates more ways to persuade and debate rather than the removal of debate altogether. This belief that communication will bring us closer to strong democracy is hopeful for the future of democratic participation and relevant for writing students.
Richard Rorty expands on Dewey's hope by identifying some of the problems that democratic process is supposed to curb. Rorty sees the capitalist market as producing two by-products that must be dealt with if the society is to be truly just and liveable, but which democratic process alone cannot solve. One is selfishness, defined as people who wish to continue accumulating wealth after they are economically secure at the expense of workers who are still living in poverty. The other is sadism, the discrimination against particular groups in society, “the delicious pleasure to be had from creating a class of putative inferiors and then humiliating individual members of that class” (76). Versions of these problems emerge in non-political communities as well: think of the child who hordes more cookies than she can eat, just so she can determine which of their friends can have any; think of the children who band together against a child with shabby clothes merely to establish themselves as superior. Rorty advocates the labor movement and the 'cultural awareness' movement as valuable contributions to the United States’ community on these fronts, but seeing where selfishness and sadism plague other communities can be a valuable point to counter the uncomplicated vision of democratic communities as moving toward ideal, kind discourse. Rather, the wish to make others inferior and to amass power for oneself still exists even in small communities, and democratic process must make a place for complaints against selfishness and sadism. Rorty points out that selfishness sometimes has to be solved before sadism in the context of the United States because many intolerant people are in situations of abject poverty and thus unwilling or unable to change their outlook toward others before they feel secure in their ability to provide for their families (92). The order of solving certain concerns within a community is one that must be analyzed in order to be effective; students could spend significant time discussing and prioritizing the concerns they see in their local communities as part of the work of democracy. Rorty’s hopeful viewpoint that these problem-solving processes do not destroy democracy allows students to view breakdowns in communication as opportunities for democracy to continue its work, not the end of democratic proceedings.

Nancy Fraser brings forward many of the important distinctions between “the triumph of liberal democracy” that is forwarded in the United States and “actually existing democracy” (56). By making specific critiques of the ‘ideal public sphere’ set forth by Jurgen Habermas, Fraser notes some of the complexities of the realm of collective decision-
making that must be noticed and accounted for if “citizens in a democracy” don’t want their supposed triumph to be a means of oppression. Fraser looks at how Habermas sees the idea of a public sphere as “a body of ‘private persons’ assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ or ‘common interest’” (58). She goes on to talk about how in Habermas’ model, the public sphere mediates between the totality of the citizenry and the ruling powers, carefully using reason to come up with a public opinion about the best course of action, which they then communicate to the government using free speech (Fraser).

Fraser sees many ways in which this process doesn’t play out in the United States and perhaps never has, but I will focus on three that I believe can be useful to students as they begin to complicate their idealized notions of democracy. The first is that it is difficult if not impossible to have people of different social classes and standings come together and deliberate as if they are all equal; even more compelling, Fraser discusses how doing this actually reinforces the status quo and keeps people who are exploited or abused in that state (61). However, the fact that people do not ‘bracket status differentials’ in discussion the way Habermas expected in the ideal public sphere should not be seen as a weakness (Fraser). In fact, Fraser’s next point is that a large amount of competing concerns, rather than a single super-rational ‘public opinion,’ is actually healthy for democracy because it grants some space for dissenting voices to be heard, rather than demanding that they be silenced entirely (62). Thus, we must present students with questions: how healthy are your communities, based upon how comfortable people feel about expressing a different opinion from the majority? The definition of democracy that Fraser would contribute would demand an understanding of deliberation and difference within a community, not merely ideals of rational discourse where everyone pretends to be equal for the sake of debate.

Fraser also discusses the private versus public divide, informing Warner’s work on publics and producing the question: what can be discussed in the community as a potential group decision, and what things are always left to individuals or family units? (73). Finally, Fraser prompts us to reduce our belief that the space for public discussion is separate from the decision-making powers. Instead, she delineates an analysis of weak publics (deliberating groups without law-making ability) versus strong publics (deliberating groups with the ability to change the law through influence or representation) (75).
communities, these lines are almost always blurred, but students will be able to notice whether a particular group of people within a community have access to the rule-changing power they seek or not. Students will benefit from complicating their view of democratic decision-making through questions about the presence of dissenting voices and diverse membership, the bracketing of private matters away from public, and the viability of change based on whether a public is weak or strong.

Finally, Scott Welsh’s contemplation of strategic speech, specifically in political discourse but also in democratic procedures of other sorts, allows us to truly bring rhetoric to the table when students consider democratic process. Welsh points out that what is sometimes called deceptive rhetoric is actually just strategic speech: emphasizing some aspects of a situation above others in order to express areas of relative concern and move people to action (Welsh). Students and others involved in democratic communities don’t need to merely distinguish between “sincere” and “strategic” rhetoric, but to also be able to distinguish between all rhetoric based on facts and rhetoric that contains outright lies (48). Thus, as students consider the discouraging viewpoint that all media and politicians are offering us incomplete perspectives, they must equally be armed with the truth about language, which is that it is always incomplete. Instead of being saddened that speech is motivated and strategic, Welsh encourages citizens to hold politicians and media accountable for outright lies, for giving untrue facts in their strategies, so that those facts can be discovered and held as examples of what is unacceptable in political discourse (56). For the same reason, students will be able to create campaigns in composition classes that do promote a particular agenda (vote more, go to school board meetings, volunteer) but do not lie in order to get those points of view across. This perspective of discussing sincere vs. strategic vs. untrue speech allows students to critically analyze the persuasive appeals they encounter not only politically but in other venues of community engagement and action. Welsh’s definition of democracy would point out that democracy values both sincere and strategic speech and must root out the untrue speech, using education and communication to do so.

These theorists of democracy allow us to nuance our definition of democracy with some of the challenges to democratic ideals. The definition that we could begin with would be “the way a group governs themselves while revising their process towards more equal
participation, more informed decision making, and more effective communication between group members.” This definition invites students to see democracy as a work-in-progress forever, where we don’t have to claim we’ve failed to achieve ideal democracy but rather have a lens through which to evaluate an individual policy: is this promoting more equal participation? Is this adding information to our decision making? Is this obscuring or clarifying communication? This definition will be constructed through a long conversation with students about what frustrates them in democratic decision-making, always keeping in view what is even worse about violent decision-making. By seeing students as capable of handling the difficulties of democracy, but also building them up with rhetorical strategies for coping, we will hopefully create complex answers to the questions: why do we sustain democracy? When can we see democracy being compromised? How does democracy look in my particular community?

**Citizenship**

Citizenship comes last in this sequence because, in the way I’m using it and the way it is often engaged in rhetoric and composition, it is a response to the realities of the first four terms. What citizenship – or civic participation, or community engagement – will look like will always be colored by the qualities of the community and its democratic process, by the writing genres available and the rhetorical analysis one has done. Obviously, citizenship has a host of other definitions, including legal terminology granting certain rights. However, citizenship as it reflects a person’s role within the agency that is granted to them is a productive concept because it sees power dynamics as obstacles to success but not rigid barriers. When discussing ways that critical pedagogy can be enacted in writing classes, David Seitz refers to a class he calls “critical citizenship studies,” which teaches students to become “critical citizens for participation in larger realms of public debate” (7). Even this perspective of critical citizenship can sometimes be dangerously reductive, but I believe that through an analysis of why many different levels of engagement exist in communities, students can grow to appreciate the leeway they have in their communities for participating in different ways. This appreciation can create less disenchantment than the rhetorical commonplace that no agency exists for the common person in politics. If students look at their impact on local communities before they try to scale their
participation up to nationwide or worldwide issues, they will find more power and give up less easily. By looking at how some compositionists define and problematize citizenship, we can come to a more effective set of questions to ask students rather than merely “how involved are you in your community?”

Amy Wan reinforces that “the will to produce citizenship through the teaching of writing is strong,” but she wants us to consider what we mean when we make such a claim (28). She points out that when citizenship is an unquestioned good goal, some of the people excluded from legal citizenship are erased as well as anyone who was never given an explicit definition of citizenship (32). Some aspect of “rights, involvement with public life, and identification with other citizens” is invoked in most definitions, but these unproblematic definitions don’t speak back in the case of flawed authorities: what if citizens are given unequal rights? What if involvement is restricted within groups of citizens? What if engagement with others is prevented by linguistic or location-based means? (34). Even if writing instructors are going to advocate specific forms of ‘good citizenship,’ Wan says “we need to make these values more explicit to our students and ourselves” (36). We not only encourage critical thinking by making definitions of citizenship explicit; we force ourselves as instructors to examine how literacy impacts and in some ways determines the limits of citizenship. Wan and other authors write about how restricted access to varying forms of literacy can limit or expand the amount of citizenship opportunities available; students need to be aware of the human and non-human “literacy sponsors” that have enabled them to come to their current views of citizenship. Wan points out that literacy as a given creates citizenship narratives of equality and individualism and in order to dismantle those narratives (in the context of complex communities and democracies) we need to be able to evaluate how literacy is unequally spread across the country and how many literacies are privileged in different local contexts (41). Wan encourages us toward more mindfulness in the ways we invoke citizenship, and her lessons give us important questions to ask our students: how have you become literate, and how has that impacted your abilities to participate in democratic communities?

Beyond the sponsorship for and access to citizenship, students are presented every day with invitations to maintain a status quo in communities or to actively go in a new direction. Many students have a preference for maintenance of the status quo or for
innovation based on family and community values; these may translate into political views but as often as not, they can be present in the rhetoric of any political party. Paul Feigenbaum terms these discursive impulses “rhetorics of adaptation” and “rhetorics of activism” (Feigenbaum). He points out that rhetorics of adaptation favor implicitly the idea that the system, whatever system, is already as good as it is going to get, and our focus needs to be defending the current state of things (Feigenbaum 38). Rhetorics of activism, on the other hand, structure the system as either flawed or having great potential, creating a call to action and change that requires just as much energy as the energy needed to maintain the status quo (Feigenbaum 45). When students are studying rhetoric, looking for these kinds of constructions in political and community discourse can help students make sense of what an individual text wants them to do but also help them realize which kinds of rhetoric they respond to most readily. Many students have been taught individualist virtues and that institutions are impenetrable and unchangeable. Even if they wish for change, they may do nothing to begin that process if they have been taught that change is impossible (Feigenbaum 44). Rhetorics of adaptation and activism allow students to answer the question: am I satisfied with the state of things, or am I convinced the current state is not changeable? Do I want to change things for the sake of novelty and change, or do I sense that the current status quo is worse than the potential outcomes of change? Feigenbaum also urges through his invocation of the “collaborative imagination” the idea that many rhetorics of adaptation imply that people have to produce social change quickly and alone, rather than over time and in community efforts (60). His hope is that by acknowledging how things seem hard to change when working from an individualist perspective, students will begin to be convinced that change, of whatever stripe they deem important, is possible through collective action (Feigenbaum). Feigenbaum’s definition of citizenship involves a commitment to collective action against injustice rather than just ‘dealing with it;’ he resists a definition of citizenship that allows for inertia in the face of injustice.

Nancy Welch also sees the long odds against student activism, but for a different reason; rather than rhetorical barriers to civic engagement, Welch examines how the privatization of public spaces has had a material effect of reducing free speech and social change. Many students, she sees, don’t know where they could legally petition the
government, even if they have productive changes they’d like to make (2). Welch points to the amount of citizens living in poverty and citizens who don’t have adequate access to education. She shows how the writing classroom can be a place where students start exploring where their voices could be heard, and what language is necessary for those voices to make an impact in a world with opaque power dynamics (21). This could be explored by many ‘what if’ scenarios with students: do they know how they could speak to their government, if they wanted? Do they believe it would have an effect? What would be the options available to them if they were in a situation with substandard education or living in abject poverty? Not only do these questions help students to understand constitutive inequalities, they also help the students understand how much of a voice they already have simply by being in a situation with access to higher education, and how that will impact their lives after college. Welch would see seeking spaces for public participation as a part of citizenship, and drawing attention to the lack of public spaces for action would be a first step to finding or reclaiming those spaces.

Thus, I propose a starting definition of citizenship for reflection as “one’s active and aware response to the pressures of a community upon one’s choices of participation.” This definition would allow students to explore both external factors and internal motivations as they respond to the many things they are evaluating about their varied and overlapping communities. Asking students “What rights and privileges are offered to you in particular communities? What rights and privileges are kept from you? How do you respond with action?” can set students on a track to developing plans for being more intentional members of the communities in which they are involved, with a renewed, reflective sense of agency even when the odds seem to be against them participating.

With these definitions to start, and a semester of complication and reflection, students may develop a renewed ability to identify features in their classes and work that require writing, rhetorical analysis, and civic intervention. The goal is not for students to end up with these definitions, but rather for them to spend some time looking at both their own definitions and these starting definitions in such a way that they begin to nuance their definitions for new contexts. In order to make these comparisons, however, instructors need to meet students where they are by trying to understand their definitions as they begin college. Chapter 3 analyzes student definitions for potential pedagogical use.
Chapter 3 – Analyzing Student Definitions of Key Terms

This chapter will look at how students from Miami University defined my key terms from chapter 2 – rhetoric, writing, community, democracy, and citizenship. They didn’t benefit from much context in my survey, since I asked for their overall definition, without asking them to relate it to their Composition and Rhetoric coursework. Valuing the definitions students have from the beginning seems essential to eventually seeing productive change in their definitions towards being flexible and useful in many contexts. At the same time, I sought to discover both changes that occurred over the course of the semester, and to see the wide variety of student definitions in hopes of creating pedagogical tools to assist those students with reflection on their definitions.

The class examined, English 111, is defined by a department-wide set of goals, with lots of curricular freedom for the instructors and professors to achieve those goals. English 111’s stated focus includes many elements: “English 111 focuses especially on helping students learn and apply rhetorical knowledge, methods, and strategies... understand, refine, and improve their composing practices; and develop the intellectual and analytical skills necessary to produce effective writing at the college level.” (Gruwell 72). The Teacher’s Guide, a resource created for new graduate instructors, goes on to explain that students are to learn how to write “in a variety of contexts,” making the focus on public writing particularly useful for the third assignment in the ENG 111 sequence, Researched Public Argument (72). While the course can have many themes within the scaffolded curriculum, it seems important to note that elements of public writing and rhetorical knowledge are important goals of the course.

Methods

I was not teaching during the semester that I surveyed students, so all of the respondents were students in a variety of sections of Composition and Rhetoric. I recruited participants by asking instructors at Miami University to use my survey as a first day of class activity to start a discussion of key terms. At the end of the semester, I sent a second email encouraging instructors to use the same survey for reflection on the semester, in hopes that I would get some responses from the same students. My sample was self-selected students from various sections whose instructors chose to present the survey in
class either once or twice. I selected the five terms the students would define in order to both explore two terms essential to composition (rhetoric and writing) and three terms that are integral to a public writing focus (democracy, citizenship, and community). A screenshot of the survey is available in Appendix A.

To preserve anonymity while also being able to match students before and after, students created a unique identifier by giving me the first two initials of their last name and their birth day and month (ex. TA0317) so that I would be able to match before and after for students who completed both surveys. This recruitment returned 219 complete responses, but only 62 of those responses were matched between before and after, so 31 students participated both times. For the purposes of my research, I used two sets of data: to analyze change over time, I used the 62 responses that were matched between before and after. In order to perform my close readings of the definitional variety, I looked at all 219 responses, regardless of whether that respondent submitted only before, only after, or both. I refer to these two data sets as “Matched” and “unmatched” in the analysis so that it can be clear where I’m drawing my conclusions.

In order to perform the analysis, I looked at the words that each student used to describe the key term in question as my units of analysis. The rationale behind coding for “before” and “after” was that I hypothesized the student definitions would shift in significant and traceable ways during the course of the semester, from including certain verbs and nouns with lesser frequency to including them with greater frequency. In other words, I imagined a convergence of meaning, from disparate past definitions to a more unified new definition. Thus, I used Voyant Tools to analyze the matched data, to see how the top 5 occurring words in the definitions (excluding articles, pronouns, and prepositions) shifted from before to after. Where large change occurred in the top 5 words, I would analyze further to see how many frequently occurring terms changed substantially. If there was little to no change in the top 5 words, I would move on to a close reading of the unmatched data, where I would specifically pay attention to the definitions that contained none or few of the top 5 words in order to analyze intriguing definitions from students that could be used as springboards for course discussions. I used the unmatched data for the close reading because I wanted the largest possible data set from which to draw on to
create a diverse set of definitions from students that could be used as a starting point for iterative definition building.

Only one of the 5 terms, rhetoric, showed major change in the top 5 words used before and after. For the other terms, there is still something to be learned by noting what definition persisted as the common definition among students, but looking to the close readings of students’ divergent definitions will be more helpful because it will allow us to see some of the more unusual but useful definitions that could help instructors move students into spaces of reflection on and revision of their definitions.

**Rhetoric: The Before and After Change, a Sign of Definitional Transfer**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 Occurring Words: Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing (12 mentions)</td>
<td>Argument (9 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way (7 mentions)</td>
<td>Different (8 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something (6 mentions)</td>
<td>Way (7 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Writing (7 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Audience (6 mentions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Demonstration of the similarity of definitions before and after**

Rhetoric showed great change in its Top 5 analysis in Voyant, with only two of the same terms appearing in the ‘after,’ so I went deeper to see what terms seemed to become most prevalent after the Top 5. As you can see from the chart below, the frequency of some key concepts in Composition and Rhetoric – rhetorical appeals, argument/persuasion, and audience - jumped from before to after. In the individual definitions, many students began the course with no definition of rhetoric at all, citing that they knew they’d heard it somewhere but couldn’t remember the definition. In the case of audience, in particular, the amount of students who mentioned it went from 9% before to 46% after, a huge jump. Of the 31 matched pairs of answers, only 9 students emerged from the course without these terms in their definitions, whereas 25 students began the semester with none of the audience concerns, persuasive mentions, or rhetorical appeals.
Table 2: Rhetoric key terms before and after the FYC class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>Rhetorical Appeals (ethos, pathos, logos)</th>
<th>Audience (and related words, like “readers”)</th>
<th>Argument/persuasion</th>
<th>None of these (a variety of other responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before</td>
<td>3 mentions</td>
<td>4 mentions</td>
<td>3 mentions</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>14 mentions</td>
<td>21 mentions</td>
<td>7 mentions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

My starting definition for rhetoric from Chapter 2 has to do with being a study of miscommunication and a drawing of attention to that which is overlooked. However, the terms most important in the literature (and thus to the instructors teaching the surveyed students) had to do with understanding of audience, the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, and elements of argument/persuasion. For this term then, we can see that the major changes in student definitions that emerged reflect the concerns of the field, but most students didn't begin the semester knowing that definition.

The very lack of knowledge of rhetoric may be both the reason students began learning so much and the reason instructors give so much explicit attention to rhetoric. When rhetoric is a term that clearly is undefined in the minds of many students, it becomes necessary to spend class time explicitly defining the terms involved in rhetoric. This seems
to be a mark of success: many more students leave this course with a robust definition of rhetoric than had one at the outset. Treating students as if they don’t all have the same definition of rhetoric to begin was effective in making their definitions more complex while still dealing with a few common concerns.

Looking specifically at the definitions given before the students began learning about rhetoric in class, the variety was extremely broad. There were plenty of versions of “I don’t know/remember,” a few answers to do with rhetorical questions and propaganda, and a large percentage saying it was related to writing. One particular student began the semester saying that rhetoric was “something that isn’t meant to be questioned. A rhetoric is meant to be something that makes a person think, and not answer.” This reflects perfectly a starting definition formed through hearing the phrase “rhetorical question.” This same student, however, by the end of the semester, defined rhetoric as “a form of language that is used to persuade the audience’s view on a certain topic by presenting the argument and backing a side with specific evidence and appeals.” While some students knew that rhetoric involved ethos, pathos, and logos before the semester started, most of them gained their complex vocabulary surrounding rhetoric, which situated these rhetorical appeals carefully with audience and persuasion, during the time between the surveys.

There was, of course, still considerable variety in the answers given during the “after” surveys. The students chose to emphasize audience or persuasion in different ways, and the ways they named rhetoric varied from “techniques” to “types of writing.” One divergent definition that I found helpful was “Questioning, analyzing, and answering the questions of everyday life.” This answer contains none of the definitional markers that I had been tracking, yet it would definitely qualify, in my mind, as a sophisticated definition of rhetoric that I’d be interested in sharing with my students. Having taken the entire composition course, this person saw rhetoric as the inquiry process itself, which is not a bad way to leave composition and rhetoric courses. When presented with this definition, students in future courses would have to decide whether they could incorporate that inquiry element into their own robust definitions for particular contexts.

Overall, while there was greater consensus by the end of the semester over the general definition of rhetoric, indicating a common vocabulary, there was still some
definitional diversity about rhetoric at the end of the semester. Students could take elements of these definitions and apply the parts they find most helpful to their own definitions of rhetoric, which clearly will evolve through readings, discussions, and writing about rhetoric.

**Writing – Complicating Identity and Instrumentalism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 Words in Definitions</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words (16 mentions)</td>
<td>Words (18 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts (8 mentions)</td>
<td>Paper (7 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas (6 mentions)</td>
<td>Act (6 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Expressing (6 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Form (6 mentions)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Demonstration of the similarity of definitions before and after*

In the Top 5 words used to describe writing, only two fully distinct words emerged, “act” and “form” in the after surveys. Because these words also appeared farther down on the list of top occurring words in the before category, I concluded that definitions of writing did not change substantially over the course of the semester, at least not in a way that could be meaningfully analyzed given my small matched data set.

When I turned to the close reading of the unmatched data, I discovered many uses of the words “express” and “your;” students were quick to connect writing with self-expression and identity. This could make for an interesting classroom conversation about the role of identity in class assignments, whether students think there should always be a personal aspect or if the assignments should reflect the genres that usually don’t involve overt self-expression taught in many other academic disciplines. In this way, some power-sharing would be given to the students based on the tension created by definitional diversity; I could open the floor for suggestions about what kinds of personal expression were appropriate and what kinds were not going to help students in future writing contexts.

One student wrote that writing was “a painful task that we must learn to do successfully.” This seems like a good entry point for students who recognize the value of writing but accurately grasp how hard it is to learn. I think it also might be a great time to
talk about how learning to write isn’t a single process, but a process you go through in each new context, building on skills from past experiences but rarely repeating the same writing steps for a totally new genre. Having this kind of candor at the beginning of the semester might also help students identify and overcome some of their writing “pains.”

There were a few references to writing being a “concrete” form of thinking or expressing, and one student called it “transcribing thoughts.” This reminded me that students often become dismayed at the fact that what they write seems less eloquent than what they were thinking about or telling a friend about. This would be a good writing anxiety to discuss early in the semester so they understand that writing isn’t just thought; it has so many purposes that it requires revision in order to sound as good to others as thoughts sound in our heads.

As you can see, few of these writing-related definitions directly connected to community or the audiences where students would be finding readers in the future. For that reason, despite the interesting divergences in the definitions that yield a few heuristic questions, I didn’t see this definition as quite so intimately connected to my course’s pedagogical goals as I once did. I think a less familiar word like literacy might bear the iterative definition building process better, but it is also a call to writing instructors on my part to think of ways we could get students to think critically about their definitions of writing in ways I haven’t found yet. Perhaps an additional word (community writing, analytical writing, academic writing) could deepen these definitions and allow students to demonstrate great definitional variety and specificity.

**Community: From Togetherness to Public**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 Words in Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before</strong></td>
<td><strong>After</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group (27 mentions)</td>
<td>People (26 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People (22 mentions)</td>
<td>Group (24 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Together (16 mentions)</td>
<td>Together (13 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common (8 mentions)</td>
<td>Similar (10 mentions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Share (6 mentions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Demonstration of the similarity of definitions before and after*
In the Top 5 words used to describe community, “common” was replaced by a synonym, “similar,” and “living” was replaced by “share” in the after surveys. Because only one new term emerged between the data sets, I concluded that definitions of community did not change much over the course of the semester, at least not in a way that could be meaningfully analyzed given my small matched data set.

The most interesting divergence in the close reading of student definitions of community was that they defined two different things: community as a group and community as a feeling, usually termed “a sense of community,” in these definitions. This gets at the heart of the warmly persuasive element discussed in Joe Harris’s text on community, and would be a good way to get students talking about why we can understand “a sense of community” when all groups are so different from each other. Other students defined this feeling as “a sense of togetherness” or “family” and the feeling of shared identities like location, values, interests, race, family, and work. While the differences weren’t notable across the “before” and “after” gap, discussing the diversity of things that a community could have in common would be a great way to get students brainstorming different kinds of communities, by asking them to name communities that share location, values, beliefs, work, etc.

One student gave the example of how Miami University was a community “because Miami students go here and love it here.” While I appreciate the example being given, this would be a great way to introduce the idea of complex membership in communities: there are certainly those who attend Miami but do not currently love it, and have an important role to play in it anyway. Another important point, made by only three students but at least mentioned, was that community can form across difference – a place that is “welcoming regardless of who you are.” I’d like for students to be able to accept a community or public where some participants aren’t excited to be there and where those who have differences can be members of a discussing body all the same.

Some students referenced how community is local, which I think is an important word to include in community’s definition, not because of geography but because it implies the possibility of communication, which begins to fade as a community is seen as a larger and larger organism. One student only mentioned that it implies “safety,” though many students referenced how members care for one another and thus are unified; I think it
might be interesting to interrogate communities where care isn’t present and certain members do not feel safe, so that students can see their groupings more like Warner’s publics and counterpublics and less like unproblematic, consensus-filled families.

At the same time, there are many things about communities that could make the course seem relevant to students, because they clearly have strong views about what makes community important. There were no students who said that community was unimportant or pitted it against individualism. Something about community as a word helps us to have the imagination to deal with the frustrations of group dynamics in order to reap the rewards of collective action and life. I am excited about the possibilities for talking to students about the many definitions and varieties of definitions that these students came up with, to see which ones they can modify and which they can incorporate into their own complex definitions of community. The survey reinforced my interest in sticking with this word, at least for local-context groups.

**Democracy – Re-envisioning Governance by the People**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 Words in Definitions</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government (17 mentions)</td>
<td>People (17 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People (14 mentions)</td>
<td>Government (10 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form (9 mentions)</td>
<td>Everyone (6 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone (7 mentions)</td>
<td>Form (6 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community (7 mentions)</td>
<td>Equal (4 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5: Demonstration of the similarity of definitions before and after*

In the Top 5 words used to describe democracy, only one fully distinct word emerged, “equal,” in the after surveys. Because this word also appeared farther down on the list of top occurring words in the before category, I concluded that definitions of democracy did not change substantially over the course of the semester, at least not in a way that could be meaningfully analyzed given my small matched data set.

Democracy, as we discussed in Chapter 2, has many things associated with it besides the ideas of using words to create change instead of force. What was often defined in the democracy survey was often descriptive of an ideal democracy, not an actually-existing
one, though occasionally people mentioned that it is an ‘unachieved’ system up till now. Even so, the amount of definitions that were distinct from each other shows that there is plenty of definitional variety to explore in our classrooms by asking interesting questions to the group. This definitional variety did not emerge neatly along before-and-after lines, as you can see from the top 5 words before and after; instead the variety was across individuals.

To begin, the definitions sometimes revolved around the word “choice,” or the phrase “to have a say in...” These two terms were generally said to be part of everyone’s right in a democracy, the ability to choose for themselves and for them to voice an opinion in discussions, presumably about the governing of the state. These choices/opinions were often connected to the ability to vote, and to the idea that power was not centrally located in the system. Here we would be able to talk directly about how communication is essential to democratic functionality. We could also begin the discussion of how all purported democratic systems have those who are not actually having a say or expressing an opinion. While there may be a set reason for such silencing, there needs to be an effort to make ever more voices heard and votes counted, if a system wants to aim for democratic action. Knowing an ideal and assuming it cannot be achieved is one of the ways that students reject participation in various forms of governance, and it’d be more productive to take a good look at actually existing systems.

There were also references to place, like calling democracy “western,” or saying that democracy was especially valued for its “freedom,” “especially as Americans.” Other values were espoused – “equality, justice, protection” – and mentions of how this form of government was “non-corrupt” also came out. All of these could lead to an interesting discussion of patriotism and democracy: could, for instance, a corrupt state emerge from democratic process? How would a democratically governed group handle the breach of such values? I think students sometimes shy away from non-patriotic speech, which I would want to respect, but I would love to continue the work of teachers and socially active citizens before me by showing students that critiquing parts of governance that aren’t working is one way to help one’s country.

One of the biggest points that could foster student involvement in my course would be the definition one student gave, that citizens of a democracy can “think for themselves.”
While ideologically I don’t think this always holds water, it shows a level of personal commitment to continual evaluation that is essential for rhetoric to be important to a person. This value, if coupled with John Dewey’s points about increased education and increased communication to promote constantly-growing democracy, could generate some democratic hope where students often do not see any.

Democracy was almost never associated with internal affairs of small local groups, so I would want students to talk about how small of a group can be governed democratically, and how large (a few students pointed out that the United States government is in fact a republic, not a democracy). Overall, I think these definitions raise the same important concerns over how to balance our goals for ideal democracy against our functioning as actually existing democracies in many local contexts. Students will benefit from talking such complex issues out, to the point where they can find roles for themselves in such community governance.

**Citizenship: Beyond Country Membership, Belonging, and Rights**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 Words in Definitions</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country (23 mentions)</td>
<td>Country (18 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part (7 mentions)</td>
<td>Being (10 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community (6 mentions)</td>
<td>Belonging (10 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Part (10 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging (5 mentions)</td>
<td>Community (7 mentions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Demonstration of the similarity of definitions before and after

In the Top 5 words used to describe citizenship, no new words appeared in the “after” list. I concluded that definitions of citizenship did not change over the course of the semester, at least not in a way that could be meaningfully analyzed given my small matched data set.

Student definitions of citizenship went almost instantly macro – most referred to countries, sometimes states, but never local or global citizenship. A thread that ran through the responses was the element that it is something that everyone has; refugee status and
oppressed people groups were erased in these definitions. This is not a mark against the students: it merely shows that nothing, up to that point in their lives, made it seem like citizenship was something that you could lack. A discussion about this, and about how some forms of citizenship grant fewer rights than others, would be useful.

In many definitions, they said that citizenship is given or bestowed by power, not something that one engages in. One student literally called citizenship “the piece of paper” that means you are a legal resident somewhere. It is usually granted by birth, they say, and indeed, many nations grant legal citizenship based on birth location. These findings aren’t remarkable in themselves, but more interesting in that they almost never mention a give-and-take, where powerful people receive benefits from the citizens and where the citizens receive benefits from the powerful. It is portrayed as one-way, and thus not something that students actively have to participate in, as passive recipients of citizenship.

The main forms of participation mentioned, and there weren’t many mentions, were “voting,” “having a say,” and “various civic activities.” These point to a suspicion I had already: students have a truncated sense of what it means to be a part of a community in an active way. Their imaginations see voting as the main duty of a citizen, but of course communities would collapse if only one day in November people were instantly ‘involved.’ It seems like an excellent moment to talk to students about how participation on any front – non-profits, local government, personal initiatives with friends - indirectly affects the citizens around them, ultimately resulting in greater community being built. There are also mentions of rights: rights to “schooling, jobs, buying goods,” which I think could be an interesting analytical point: does citizenship imply rights, or are those rights earned as a community, established through participation? Students might get into an interesting chicken-or-egg discussion with this, but it would demonstrate a powerful point about rhetoric: how participation and rights are related in your mind affects your actions.

One interesting element was that citizenship implied support, patriotism. This is certainly true among some citizens in some communities, but I’d like to ask my students, once I show them those definitions, why we feel loyalty about some groups (our football teams, our countries) and not about others (people who live in our apartment building, classmates in our college English classes)? How much loyalty is healthy and how much is
detrimental to even the community itself? Here are questions I never would have thought of without the students’ definitions to guide me to concerning areas.

A word that I am still wrestling with, which came up in many of the definitions of both citizenship and democracy, was “belonging.” I find it an undefined word, like citizenship itself often is, but it clearly has rhetorical power if so many students use it to describe their thoughts about citizenship. I’d like to lead my students through an unraveling of belonging, trying to decide if a community only encompasses those who belong or if a community has a responsibility to be welcoming until anyone could potentially belong? Context is clearly important, and I bet a discussion with the students would highlight other facets I have missed.

**Implications**

When surveying student definitions, the goal must include both pedagogical potential and current pedagogical impact. Though I claim to privilege student definitions, students will know if their definitions are set up as straw horses in order to quickly be shot down in class discussion. If student see me in front of the classroom, taking a past student’s definition as a serious object for discussion, they will hopefully be more likely to share and revise their own definitions.

I realized as I read the definitions students gave for writing that, of all the keywords, I have the fewest pedagogical directions to take this term of all five. This probably makes it the top candidate for removal from the list in favor of another keyword, perhaps literacy, but I think it illustrates an important point about the iterative nature of a project like this: a term like writing, so key to describing our work and identifying compositionists to the university and to students, might not actually be the term we need to problematize in a class that only lasts a semester. However, the surveying process must happen multiple times, with different words and in different contexts, before the key terms can be generalized in any helpful way, or become even 100% useful in a local context.

Knowing where this particular sample of students are coming from when they define these terms allows me to begin planning a class that would give plenty of time to students for writing and reflecting upon their own definitions, in comparison with some examples from this study as well as my own base definitions. While there is not sufficient
data in this study to conclude that explicit definition building is more effective than implicit definitions in classes, the transfer literature about the aid of metacognition supports my goals of adding more definition building exercises to the class. In Miami’s curriculum, students are most likely to enter college fairly unfamiliar with rhetoric, and so the instructor training includes specific models for helping students define this word complexly. Using the iterative definition building model for the other terms seems likely to produce more definitional complexity as students leave the classroom, prepared to make their definitions flexible in future contexts. As I developed the following course plan in Chapter 4, I kept in mind my interest in flexible, applicable definitions attuned to the issues and complexities I found in these survey results.
Chapter 4: Rationale/Scaffold Plans for “Writing in Democratic Communities” Course

Rationale for the Course:

In order to give an example of how I will use iterative definition building, I have created a course description and scaffold plans of three units. Before I share those plans, I will discuss five models that have influenced the design of “Writing in Democratic Communities.” I believe these five models and course designs have been most influential in my overall goal of constructing a class where defining the key terms writing, rhetoric, democracy, community, and citizenship clearly and flexibly are at the forefront. The course emerged with the goals of having students situate themselves more intentionally in the roles they play within groups, including but not limited to discourse communities within the university and community partnerships through service learning.

First, using the ecological model advanced by Urie Brofenbrenner, I will advocate that students make connections from our writing class into other contexts, starting with looking to the past and to personal experience during our first unit, then to larger contexts, then to the future of their involvement with the community and the university.

By seeing their work as interrelated with both larger realms of power and past personal experiences, the reflective potential of any given activity extends both into the past and into the future; by showing them this model and explicitly cuing throughout the semester, I hope for students to see each activity as meaningful in the classroom environment (an example of a small community in which students interact) as well finding connections to their family life, work life, and larger systems like state and local governments.

These connections between systems are valuable because research on learning transfer says that students need to explicitly discuss the skills that transfer from one context to another, rather than just hope that the new situation will remind them of the past context. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak contribute to the explicit “cuing for transfer” in their Teaching for Transfer (TFT) curriculum. This course relies heavily on understanding of key terms and on reflection, extending the curriculum as it is presently used in many composition classrooms. They emphasize reiterative reflection on key terms as important for their transfer model in two ways: “1. By incorporating a set of key terms
as conceptual anchors for a composition content, and 2. By threading throughout the
course a specific, reiterative, reflective practice linked to course goals, which themselves
take transfer of knowledge and practice as a first priority” (42). Yancey, Robertson, and
Taczak’s ideas of reiterative reflective practice will be added into my course as in-class
freewrites, double-entry notebooks for homework, and reading response questions that
ask students to apply lessons from texts to our class concerns and their future writing. The
key terms will be factored in at many moments throughout the course, using some version
of the question, “How does (today’s reading or writing or discussion) affect our definition
of (key term currently being discussed)?” in hopes that by the final reflective assignment,
the students will be using these terms in contexts that will be recognizable to their peers
and instructor, but will also serve them in future writing contexts, where a new discursive
community will continue to nuance and change their definitions. The model Yancey,
Robertson and Taczak advance does not include community, citizenship, and democracy as
key terms, so I had to adapt their model slightly in order to allow for a more overt
exploration of democratic process and community engagement.

In order to have community-related content to reflect upon, I structure my second
unit around exploration and analysis of community partners like non-profits, local
governmental departments, and governmental agencies. My model does not involve direct
service learning, though it could be adapted to do so; instead, students imagine situations
they might face and create documents in response to invented exigencies, for the purpose
of preparation for community contexts they will later encounter. This is by no means the
only way that one could perform a close analytical look at a community context, but
because of the recent surge in literature about service-learning in writing classes, I was
able to find many examples of ways that students went out into the community and
encountered the contexts of insiders and outsiders, roles within groups, contextual genres,
and local resistance to activist work (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters). Most
specifically, I draw on Nora Bacon’s combination of discussing why community service
writing is valuable and also why it becomes problematic – her most compelling points
being that students will often be motivated more by a grade than by the work of the
organization, and that students take longer than a semester to fully enter a new discourse
community at a non-profit (Bacon). Because of these potential pitfalls, I believe a writing
classroom is a great place for students to discuss hypothetical situations and determine how they would linguistically adapt to the new situations they might encounter. Shaping the course’s specific examples and assignments to the service-learning contexts had two purposes: first, it allowed me to use examples that no student could claim as “fully irrelevant” to them, since most students acknowledge that there is a need for non-profits and local governmental services in communities (as opposed to studying only a few business contexts, or a particular kind of family context). Second, this course could now reasonably evolve into a pre-requisite or optional preparatory course for students who think they want to join a service-learning course in the future.

The idea of a service-learning prerequisite course came to me through Paul Feigenbaum in his two course series at Florida International University that begins with a semester called “Why Go Public?” He has structured the series of courses so that students spend time looking at the reasons why anyone participates in local community, and then the following semester they can continue with the sequence and participate in service learning. I saw this as a valuable way to grant students space to explore their interests and implicit beliefs about community contexts, perhaps becoming more informed beforehand so that they can get the most out of service-learning courses. Feigenbaum himself, discussing the projects he assigns, points out that “my primary interest in asking students to create a project from scratch and carry it out… has not generally been the project per se, but, rather, expanding students’ imaginations about what it means to be a good citizen” (183). In my course, it would be made clear that the self-defined roles one sees for citizenship apply, via the ecological model, to lots of other contexts, so service learning would merely be a location from which to imagine other possibilities. I would encourage students to apply those lessons from analysis of service-learning community contexts to all the other contexts where they find themselves interested in engaging civically. Future iterations of the course, in the right institutional context, could become more heavily dependent or connected to service-learning, but the current structure is made to work one way or the other.

The other innovative aspect of Feigenbaum’s course that I found valuable was that it allows students room to discuss not only why they choose to be active citizens, but also why they often choose their battles and don’t actively engage. Feigenbaum’s rhetorics of
adaptation and activism, as referenced in Chapter 2, provide a useful heuristic that doesn’t demonize students for being unengaged in particular community issues; rather, it points out where students put the majority of their priority and has them analyze whether, in the future or in another circumstance, they would want to reallocate time and effort to other causes and actions. Feigenbaum expects students to see the “excitement and frustration of working with a local public,” because just as they themselves will find some tasks unworthy of engagement, others will sometimes find their passionate arguments unpersuasive (183). By reading examples about community issues, students will widen their imaginations as regards ways to get involved, and perhaps discover a project that interests them. While still affected by power dynamics, my course seeks to employ some of Feigenbaum’s strategies for non-judgmental investigation of citizenship roles, including many of the frustrating aspects involved, allowing for the idea that students have reasons for resisting particular kinds of participation, but that participation in other places is difficult and worthwhile.

While student resistance would be valued and accepted in this course, I take my instructor role from James Berlin’s perspective on critical literacy in *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Culture*. He has students analyze artifacts of popular culture, not artifacts of community partners in service-learning, but his approach specifically highlights understanding ideology: “Texts should be understood in terms of what they omit as well as what they include, and they should be situated within their historical context” (Berlin 128). A course should engage with the underlying assumptions in texts and help students both read for those assumptions and write with those assumptions in mind. While Berlin is specifically engaging with cultural texts like television and film in his course “Codes and Critiques,” he shares my concern about political communication: “an important objective of this course is to prepare students for critical citizenship in a democracy. We want students to begin to understand that language is never innocent, that it instead constitutes a terrain for ideological battle” (131). While I want students to help me direct the course into areas they are interested in, I also want to make sure that I keep these ideological concerns in full view while teaching, so I can be a voice that aims toward critique if our definitions ever get too simplistic.

Overall, these scholars allow me to value connections within student ecologies, reflection about thoroughly-investigated key terms, specific examples in the form of non-
profit and local government engagement scenarios, acceptance of resistance to participation as a good moment for self-reflection, and the ability to read discourse for underlying ideological precepts. Together, I hope that this course will teach writing in a way that is complex, relevant, applicable to future contexts, and memorably specific. An important note on the scaffold plans included here is that I have added more options than will necessarily be possible during the course of a single semester, but I hope by having too much material I will help any interested instructor to have choices in what they do and do not assign, given the student interest and knowledge in their particular context.

Course Description and Scaffold Plans:

ENG 225: Writing In Democratic Communities
Course Description: In this course, students will have the opportunity to critically analyze and refine their definitions of and roles in local communities. The course will require reading and writing about one’s past experiences as a ‘citizen’ of different communities, employing research techniques to understand how argument is made using elements of local context that aren’t always immediately apparent. The students will use case studies from service-learning scenarios to develop their own communication campaign that could potentially benefit either a community or a non-profit, as well as reflecting critically on where the efficacy of that campaign comes from. Along the way, students will discuss how different communities define themselves through language, what the roles of insiders and outsiders in different communities are, and how communities create and sustain governing procedures in democratic and undemocratic ways. Students will end the course by reflecting on the community-of-language they will enter in their future major or career, as well as investigating some of the standards, procedures, and membership elements involved in those communities of language.

Unit 1: The Local: Our Class and Miami University
Terms to Discuss:
Citizenship, Democracy, Writing as they relate to Classroom Roles, Governmental Roles, Reflection, and Narrative.
Complicating Questions:

- Who and what affects what you write, based on your past experiences?
- What kind of writing do you do as a citizen of communities?
- How does writing create democratic processes in communities?
- Why do we work to solve things democratically?
- What are the ways democracy can be compromised or descend into oppression?
- How does democracy look in our particular communities?
- How does narrative help us frame our old communities and create new ones?

Assignment:

The first assignment would be a reflective narrative, scaffolded to get students to start connecting many of the heuristic questions about the key terms from class to personal experiences. In their reflective narratives, they would elaborate ways they learned the defining qualities of two different communities (a school, a family, a town, a group of friends, an organization, etc.). They would compare narrative moments when they were made aware of insiders and outsiders, or when they were empowered or disempowered by the way the group functioned. During the class periods, in addition to peer review where students will help each other add analysis and detail, the students will spend time analyzing case studies of different communities, as well as beginning to investigate genres in community contexts by reading various documents written to a particular community, examining the qualities that made them effective or ineffective.

Once the first element is finished, the class focus will turn toward a research component, and toward the critical understanding of what you do when you research a group. The students will select a community they are either attempting to join now or which they would like to join eventually and perform a detailed “community discourse analysis” where they look at the kinds of terms, documents, and rules that people in that community must know about. This analysis is meant to be about a community the students know fairly well already so they can actually get access to documents with which to practice; much of the classtime will be spent in discussing both access to documents and the many complexities of different communities and the direct effect that has on writing and reading practices. We will read essays and articles that forward different viewpoints or
perspectives on our key terms and try to see whether or not those articles and essays change our overall definition. When the community discourse analysis is turned in, students will reflect on how they would change the class definitions of the terms, if at all; if not, what questions would they add to the questions I provide them? Deciding which of these questions are most important to cover in the analysis will form the core of the rubric by which I grade the community discourse analysis.

Readings: I will have students read a bit about power-sharing in classrooms – probably only a small selection from When Students Have Power – and also an article by Neil Gaiman all about why studying the liberal arts is beneficial in many realms. We’ll talk about the idea of the good life that Shor discusses as the main topic of his course, and how being able to write well and analyze the circumstances surrounding a writing task can be advantageous to them. The students will also read about deliberate resistance to learning, called “unlearning,” described in the title essay of the book I Won’t Learn From You. As students move into discussions of citizenship, we’ll be reading a chapter from Dewey’s The Public and its Problems that discusses the search for the ‘great community’ and the way that entertainment/distraction sometimes gets in the way of good civic participation. To nuance the discussions of citizenship, we will read a summary of Iris Marion Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression” and try to understand how certain aspects of certain communities can yield all the different types of oppressive behaviors, from a local to a national level. After speaking with the students about the ways they’ve been taught about citizenship, I will also select one or two primary documents, such as chapters from civics textbooks or pamphlets from local government, for us to textually analyze for their appeals to the community. All readings will be used to think about what contexts make for both a successful learning environment and a successful community in general. For each reading throughout the semester, the students will have 3-4 guiding questions as well as a required contribution to a double-entry notebook of quotations that can be referenced in class; preferably, this notebook would be a collaboration between all students using a program like Google Documents, but it would still be valuable as a pen-and-paper exercise.
Activities: The unit will begin with a definition activity; this first time, I would use the five key terms outlined in early chapters, but I’m sure to find out that one or more of them are not useful, or that students need another term to fully explore the themes of this course. This iterative design is meant to adapt to the changing concerns of students but also to my growing understanding of how a classroom like this would function.

After logging their initial definitions, we would talk about the function of defining: why do we do it? How does it help us interact with each other? I would show them some sample definitions from my study and allow them the space to critique those definitions so that they can start to see the difference between a dictionary definition and one that promotes action. I would share with the students my objectives for the class, and I would encourage them, during a freewrite, to consider objectives they have for the class. Thinking about their wider communities, I will remind them that even required activities, such as a writing class, can have some room for them to gain benefits of their own choosing, and so it is worthwhile for their concerns to be noted.

With an explicit goal of modeling the kinds of interactions that go on in communities, we will discuss and create a classroom constitution: it will enumerate policies, practices, goals, restrictions, and power options for the students. I will start with a fairly large list of options for them to choose from (drawn from good practices from other courses I’ve taught or participated in) and they will spend some time in small groups deciding which of those options should be a part of the class constitution. They will also choose whether or not they should be modified or completely changed. This class constitution will conclude with a reflection on the parts of the process they felt most attached to and the parts where they felt the least powerful; was that a negative experience or more familiar, like a traditional classroom, where they knew that the instructor held all the power to decide how the course would be run?

Because early in the semester is often the hardest time for invention exercises if students have not experienced open-ended prompts before, we will spend a lot of time generating lists of scenarios, communities, roles for government, and roles in citizenship, specifically with a goal of realizing that there is not one set of civic goals. These lists, I will point out, don’t contain everything that we could possibly include in definitions of citizenship, community, or democratic process, and I will periodically return to them in
order to have students add aspects from the reading in order to make the connections more clear.

One way in which we’ll make sure that there is narrative in the topics that the students select will be an in-class activity I call “step by step,” where instead of writing a traditional outline, the students have to write a chronological list of what happens in the story they are telling. If the story is hard to tell, or only had 2 steps in it, I may suggest that they either expand the scope of the story or pick a different anecdote around which to structure their essay. The last step is adding bullet points under each step in order to note the reflective element, lesson learned, or aspect of citizenship shown in each part of the process. This then can serve as an outline or a way for the students to decide if their topic is working for them.

Finally, I will lead an overt discussion about power-sharing after the first peer review session by showing the students in-depth definitions of the things I value in this assignment (engaging story, reflection, analysis related to citizenship, future directions this anecdote makes you think of, deliberate organization, clear transitions/linkage, easy to read) and ask them to decide what matters most/least, in terms of how I grade. I will talk to them about how decisions like this happen in communities all the time: by getting to set the parameters of the question, I exercise power, but by answering the question and possibly adding new categories or modifying the existing ones, they get to respond with power. While not a representative democracy, it is an example of an experience where everyone must participate in order for the full project to be accomplished; everyone just doesn’t have the same roles. After the students present their rubric options (developed in small groups), I will tell them the good ideas I found in each one, foregrounding how many of those are points I hadn’t thought about and thus they make me a more informed grader, and then have them reflectively freewrite about how they feel their role as a student is and is not a role with power in the community of the classroom or the university.

Unit 2: The Wider Scene: Community Partners and Community Organizations

Terms to Discuss:

Rhetoric, Writing, Community as they refer to Insiders, Outsiders, Persuasion, Argument, Audience, Reciprocity.
Complicating Questions:

- What texts form important parts of community experience?
- How does a particular community situate itself with or against other communities?
- How does someone go about joining a new community?
- What are some of the markers of insiders and outsiders in communities?
- Why should we examine community communications closely?
- What are some of the markers of persuasive texts in a community context?
- What are some of the best practices for joining communities via our writing?

Assignment:

The project in this section of the course will be two-fold, with some smaller proposal stages as they work. First, the students will be trying to research and propose an aspect of change in the community non-profit (or government agency) they have chosen. They will make their hypothetical advocacy from a position of knowledge and research, not merely from a personal preference, using a genre akin to a white paper or position paper. The second part of the project after this researched proposal/argument will be a persuasive product that would accomplish their researched advocacy: it may be multimedia or text-based, but it must be integrated into the circumstances set out by the argument, so that the audience in question is clearly being addressed. Students will have time to ask questions of non-profit guest speakers about what would and wouldn’t appeal to them and the communities they serve. These projects would then be ‘focus group tested,’ using a role play activity where each student pretends to be a leader in a non-profit who is receiving these proposals and evaluates them in their early form, as a form of peer review.

Readings:

I would have students read sections of community service writing literature, preferably a section from Paula Mathieu’s book The Tactics of Hope and a section from Nora Bacon’s “Community Service Writing,” which specifically have to do with writing in community contexts and how it can be complicated or problematic. I will also have them read the case study from Paul Feigenbaum’s “Creative Maladjustment” article about students starting their own Peace Day Celebration and experiencing mixed results, and
some of the narrative sections of Linda Flowers *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*; these would provide the complex but invigorating counterpoint to the cautions in Mathieu and Bacon. These examples show student success when they “get involved,” but show that success is usually more modest than students initially expect of their action. Before having the students do this reading, I would have them reflect on how they might want to do service learning (or if they don’t want to do service learning, what locations of community engagement most appeal to them? If none, what parts of one’s job might be seen as “service to the community” rather than part of the job description?) so that we can talk about these texts as an example of entering new communities, not merely as a pre-requisite for an experiential learning course. The reflective questions accompanying each article or excerpt would involve making connections to past experiences in community contexts as well as an analysis of particular elements of good outsider/insider behavior in those communities. Class discussion would revolve around how the situations could have gone differently, for good and for ill, and what precautions they themselves would have to take in such a situation.

Part of this unit will involve listening to podcasts (or reading podcast transcripts) from *This American Life* (investigative journalism about interesting issues in the US), *Freakonomics* (economic analysis of subjects not traditionally covered by economics), and *The Good Fight* (podcast about progressive political action and the people who run it). The Podcasts I am thinking of including involve a show called “Tribes” which refers to groups of people and the ways they react to each other and internal politics of small communities, “Outsiders By Design” which is about the way that certain traits characterize people as beyond traditional communities but for specific reasons that make them integral to the social system, and “Cory and Rand Paul,” a podcast documenting a bi-partisan attempt to make it easier for people who have served prison sentences to get jobs afterwards. While all of these are specifically about communities outside of the local context, they give the students another set of examples to practice their analysis of key terms on; each podcast will be followed by either an audio or written response that addresses reading response questions and draws out important points to be used in the double-entry notebook. In class, students will have to talk about whether these people are finding themselves in community situations different from or similar to the ones we discussed during our first
unit, as well as discuss the ways that people are successfully and unsuccessfully creating change in their communities: what might they need to research more, or how might they address their audiences better?

While less theoretical, this unit would involve a lot of models and examples: calls for proposals for non-profit grants, texts from local governments advocating particular civic practices, public-facing newsletters from non-profits that are both informative and implicitly persuasive. I specifically want my students to look at a local grant called *People’s Liberty*, that offers funds for individuals who want to increase civic participation in their local area of Cincinnati, and that can take many forms.

*Activities:*

One activity the students would do in the lead-up to the project would be to look at an issue or change that could be implemented and use a Highlander Folk School “Power Analysis” diagram worksheet to start to get a holistic understanding of the situation. The Power Analysis allows them to write in the people and legal precedents that will affect the success of their campaigns, which helps them choose an audience as well as notice who is most likely to be an ally.

An activity that students will participate in a couple times will be a role-playing activity, where we take whatever key terms have emerged most prominently in the day’s discussion and apply them to a variety of service-learning, study-abroad, and internship-related case studies. I have included a sample list of case studies in Appendix C. Ideally, by working in small groups, students could do this activity various times, developing an answer to share with the whole class that involved specific steps, some internet-based research, and a clear connection to the key term. By practicing with case studies, students are adopting a valuable metacognitive role, which the instructor will cue them to do again when they are faced with obstacles and frustrations in future community-engagement circumstances. Using the key terms and analytical thought processes will make problems becoming solvable through thought, collaboration, and research rather than making them barriers to success.

Students will be developing, over this section of time and in response to different readings, some best practices for being an insider or being an outsider in their
communities. I will talk to them about how insiders sometimes decide someone is an outsider even if most of their involvement remains ‘insider-like,’ and so outsider and insider are language constructions that allow us to accomplish different things. We’ll talk about some of the behaviors we see in the texts that imply insider and outsider attitudes, and decide which elements would be best for us to have: how to be an insider who encourages difference, and how to be an outsider who respects the history of a community that they may not know yet? This project will also include reflective writing about whether the student, as they write their research argument and advocacy project, is acting as an insider or an outsider in the particular community, and specific language choices they have to make to show that to their intended audiences.

Unit 3: The Future: How to Apply this Work.

Terms to Discuss:
Citizenship, Democracy, Writing as it regards Discourse Community, Literacy, Novice, Expert

Complicating Questions:

- How does one become literate in a new academic writing context?
- How do we select between adapting to current circumstances and advocating for change in our community contexts?
- What are the processes available to us for becoming active in community settings? How have those circumstances changed?
- What rights and privileges are offered in the communities you are attempting to enter? What rights and privileges are reserved for other members of the community?
- How, if at all, would you want to change your own role as a citizen of a local community, and what steps will you take to achieve that change? How will writing factor into that future role?

Assignment:

The final reflection will be a paper about the role they see themselves playing as members of an academic or vocational community, including an analysis of how they see
the situation currently and how they themselves would need to behave in order to find their place. The assignment would also include them making a plan for how to enact the citizenship goals they make for themselves throughout the course and a final revision of their 5 definitions specifically with an eye to how they can use them in future classes. This work would involve a small amount of research, in the form of interviews and primary documents within their chosen field, but would be much more focused on explicit re-application of the terms of the course into the discourse communities they are attempting to enter. I would encourage students to pay attention when speaking with people in their major: do they use community, citizenship, democracy in the ways we have discussed? Are there other complicated terms that they need to investigate in order to really understand the situation they face? What writing, reading, and research skills will help them successfully join that speaking/writing community?

Readings:

One of the readings during this section would be a chapter from *Generation at the Crossroads* called “An Unsentimental Education: Ethical Detachment in the Classroom” from a study that investigated the reasons for citizen and activist participation in the late 80s university scene. Students would be asked to identify argumentative points in this chapter, for the author is clearly advocating a change, but also to point out evidence that is particularly compelling, or to cite student interviewees that speak of situations that are still true in 2015.

As students delve deeper into their particular disciplines, I would assign parts of the open sourced textbooks from WAC Clearinghouse as “collective readings” – the students each are responsible for reading a chapter and bringing the key points into the class to share with their classmates. I would most likely try to assign chapters based on students’ majors, but where the majors don’t line up, I would remind them that we can use texts about writing in other disciplines to find ‘categories’ of writing in our own: for instance, reading about how passive voice is used in some sections of scientific writing can give us the category of “preferred voice,” which we can investigate in our own fields.

One night’s reading will be individualized, where I work with the students to select a peer-reviewed journal article and some more informal writing (blogs, perhaps) for the
students to compare an example of formal and informal writing in their discipline. The homework questions would revolve around noting the features of that text after having read about “how to write in the social sciences” or “how to write in biology.” In class, the students would spend time sharing these findings and compiling with other students who have similar majors, trying to see if there were any potential categories for genre conventions that they missed. If possible, I will either have a panel of disciplinary instructors talk to the students or have them attend office hours of one of the professors in their discipline to talk a bit about advice for being a good member of the ‘biology student community’ or the discourse community at large.

Another set of readings, drawn from Paul Feigenbaum’s “Why Go Public?” class, will be an article called “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” and another called “Join Wall Street, Save the World,” which discuss two radically different ways of using one’s everyday life/work to affect change. The reflective writing associated with these readings will involve students discussing what positive effects come from their planned daily-life choices, and how they may want to select an employer or line of work specifically to align with those goals. In class, they will have to point out some of the citizenship roles that still seem far-fetched.

Activities:

One activity that I want to have during the brainstorming time for the final assignment is something called “the Great Raft Debate.” It involves a thought experiment where the world is being destroyed and a raft full of people is floating away to a desert island and the people must rebuild society. All the people available are parts of different academic disciplines, and they must make a case to the ‘public’ about what academic discipline is most likely to help them rebuild society. Students would participate in this as part of groups; groups of three would choose a potential discipline from the ones they are working with, brainstorm the benefits, try to anticipate the counterarguments, and then one of them would be a candidate for the raft to represent them all. The students not debating will be in charge of asking the ‘tough questions’ that get the candidates defending their disciplines abilities. At the very end of the activity, the instructor will field the question, how will your writing skills in this discipline benefit the new society down the
line? If this question yields good answers, they students will be able to talk about how they will incorporate those answers into their projects; if this question yields blank stares, the students will spend some time writing about how this activity showed them new ways that their majors are valuable in their current lives.

As they work on their projects, I will ask them to share documents they’ve found, either about writing in the disciplines or models of their actual writing, in a Google Drive folder. On one day, they will do a collaborative document analysis with someone who comes from a similar major as they do, trying to develop ideas together about how to be a good member of that community and how to write well for their discursive audience. This will be before peer review, but will probably be the same groups they use, so that they can get extended feedback on their ideas in different forms.

A final-day-of-class activity will be doing a “step-by-step” outline for one civic activity. For instance, rather than calling “go vote” a single step, the students will divide out the process into “finding the voters guide, highlighting aspects of candidate ideas that matter to me, asking at least one politically involved friend for advice, making a hole in my schedule to go vote, dragging a roommate with me, etc.” If it is a plan to volunteer at a particular non-profit, they can include steps where they participate as a “good outsider” or “good insider” and show how their progress over time will look. This way, the students walk out of the classroom with a physical reminder that writing can make action possible, even if it is small and very specific action.
Chapter 5 – Future Contexts for Iterative Definition Building

I began this thesis with a story about first year composition; I will end it with my final course in my undergraduate studies, a class called “Publishing Narrative.” By the time I arrived at this course, I was quite uncertain about my future goals, having tried on various hats in internships and school jobs and found most of them askew. When I walked into this course, the instructor clearly set out that the course format would involve a lot of reading and a lot of writing, and that we would be seeking two things: to define what it is to publish, and to define what narrative is. These goals, so seemingly simple, turned into some of the best discussions I had in my college career. By reading models of different genres of ‘narrative’ and writing our own attempts at those genres, we were able to add complexity to our already-extensive definitions of publishing and narrative over the course of the semester. The work we did, for instance, on the narratives implicit in people’s tattoos, remains one of the first lessons that springs to my mind when I think about stories in images. That course showed me something different from my Foundations of Human Communication course: while one course showed me that there were words for concepts I’d never known how to name, this final course showed me that there was more complexity in words I thought I already knew how to define.

My hope for my work is that it can meet students where they are, either as novices who are encountering words that help them frame and reframe their worlds, or as they are creating expertise by opening up their definitions to new contexts and revising them to be flexible and applicable. The simple survey that allows students to define some key words in the instructor’s planned curriculum is both flexible in its current form and able to be revised in many ways, which I hope will renew this goal of meeting students where they are.

This chapter is both further research and a thought experiment about how iterative definition building could serve other concerns of compositionists. Much like I applied a study of explicit definitions to the terms of interest to public writing scholars, a cultural studies instructor could use writing and rhetoric to examine culture, subjectivity, and identity, or a film studies instructor could use FYC to explore gaze and genre. Explicit connections are made between the process of learning these composition content areas
and the learning processes that students will undergo in the future, analogous situations. Students sometimes already make transferable connections, but giving space to do it explicitly as part of the requirements of the course is likely to increase transferability and student acknowledgement of the value of FYC (Yancey, Robertson, Taczak).

In the same vein as my student survey of definitions, I believe that it would be interesting to have graduate and faculty instructors fill out the same survey that I used for this project in order to determine if we have broad dissent about the definitions of these terms even within our teaching collective. This could culminate in a workshop or mission-statement-building session where instructors gather to discuss what elements of the definitions are most integral to curricular goals. It would also address the benefits of having definitional diversity in our teaching, which helps students recognize many facets of the terms they encounter in various writing classes. The goal, rather than broad consensus, would be a more orderly dissensus where we had texts to compare rather than implicit assumptions about each other’s perspectives.

In addition to surveying additional teachers at Miami, it would also be useful to extend this study to different institutional contexts. To ask students and teachers in a department with a strong Teaching for Transfer focus, or a more intense focus on public writing, how their definitions of these terms shift, might yield utterly different results. In addition to modifying the scope and sample of the definitional survey, I have considered some other fields of study that are often explored in writing classes, to try to imagine what terms might be valuably studied for their definitional tendency and variety.

*Sustainability:* For example, it would be interesting to explore definitions of sustainability by students in ecologically minded comp classes. As more and more scientists weigh in on the facts and more communities around the globe report changes in the ecological patterns that determine their ways of life, a relevant offering would be a class seeking to determine how sustainability as a concept is circulating in society. Ecocomposition is already an established subfield from which to draw different starting definitions (Dobrin; Weisser; Owens). Also, it would be important to explore how sustainability relates to indigenous societies that seek to live in a way that finds harmony with their surroundings. Sustainability could be discussed in relation to locality, and in relation to the very real possibility that fossil fuels will be fully depleted in coming decades.
Much student discourse around sustainability, like the discourse around democracy, suffers from a despair-or-idealism dichotomy that isn’t productive. The key, when discussing sustainable futures, seems to be to look to for ways that humans can change and avoid the doomsday scenarios that plague most discussions of sustainability. This class would be a great way to discuss how to communicate important calls to action when the dominant discourse is uninterested or scared of what you are saying. Definitions of sustainability and its attendant terms could grow over the semester and over the course of viewings and readings of sustainability as it is used in contemporary discourse.

**Literacy:** Literacy came up as an important form of understanding and engaging with the world in many of my readings on community engagement. In a course similar to the one I have designed, students could explore how literacy develops in different places, what practical skills are involved in literacy, how digital literacy has reinforced existing hierarchies (discussing with the students, for example, the many advantages that one loses if they don’t know how to operate a computer effectively). Complicating and nuancing literacy in the minds of students will help them to start seeing the ability to read a situation or a task as equally valuable to being able to read a street sign or a textbook. The interesting work on literacy sponsorship in our field, digital and otherwise, would be a valuable resource for this course (Brandt; Ruecker; Pandy). While perhaps an entirely different course, the idea of the digital could be incorporated as one of the key terms in this course and explored in some of its complexity in a way that the composition literature is prepared to help problematize for students through the definition building process.

**Self-Expression:** In a strange turn away from the more spontaneous aspects of expressivism, it might be interesting to design an expressivist class that interrogates, through reflection and reading about others who are expressing themselves, what the term self-expression really means. How does it contradict or coincide with addressing an audience? How does it affect one’s anxiety about a writing task? Whatever the final definition might be, this kind of course could be a really solid foundation for students looking to go into the arts, and would give them a nuanced vocabulary for explaining their work in artists’ statements and to future students. The ability to marshal self-expression in meaningful and specific ways in relation to various texts could bring students to new and interestingly rhetorical understandings of self-expression, and could help teachers of
composition to get the most out of a term that is used implicitly both by students and the field without always having a clear definition of what it means in different contexts.

Publics: While I discuss in some detail the connections between Michael Warner’s view of publics and the student perception of community, I don’t deeply engage the literature on publics; the complexity of these terms as separate concepts could create a whole course to itself. This course could be more focused on writing as communication in complex network of groups, which is more true to an ecological model, and might be more successfully engaged as a higher-level course. I can imagine a course on publics where students delve deep into the existing public sphere theory, rather than working with only a few theorists’ lenses, as I have done mostly for the sake of time in the course I’ve developed. These potential topics for first-year courses are just a small set of examples to show how many courses could use an iterative definition building model within the goals of Teaching for Transfer in order to make sure student definitions are valued while being given room to grow and change in response to texts and inquiry.

Outside of first-year composition entirely, another unexplored aspect of the definition-building process is how it could be useful in explaining disconnects between writing center consultants and clients. As consultants work with their clients, they must instantly calibrate to the definitions that students bring to the center: definitions of writing center work, of the genres they are working in, and of the kinds of help a consultant can provide. The sooner the consultant can get to the student’s definition of, for instance, “grammar,” the sooner they can productively work on the paper, but neither will leave satisfied if they work only in implicit definitions in spite of misunderstanding or difference. Their definitions need not be the same, but instructing consultants on how to understand the definitions of students can help them prepare for the sessions they will face, so that they don’t spend time trying to convince students of their personal definition, but instead work from the student’s current definition toward a definition that increases their agency in the task they are attempting.

Definitions’ Roles in Composition as a Field

I believe that incorporating iterative definition building is neither easily done nor completely explained in this thesis. Instead, I am opening a discussion about how we structure our courses in relation to the way students will write and communicate outside
our classrooms, in the public and in their other courses. One of my fears is that our course will be seen as irrelevant while we still have useful things to teach. Like Elizabeth Wardle, I had the temptation to recommend abolishing FYC because it couldn't deliver the things I wanted, but the power of rhetoric is that we understand how much we can change the relevance of a course by changing the objectives it claims to pursue (Wardle 784). I want FYC to continue, but for every content area that we choose to apply our writing and rhetoric terminology to in first-year courses, there is a corresponding need for clear vocabulary that students can build during the semester, which is such a quick turn-around for students to acquire transferable skills. I would argue that the field of composition not only benefits from explicitly voicing definitions for our students, even as they are subject to constant change; the field could also benefit from a more explicit definition-building process in our literature, even as we acknowledge that every new definition is applicable in only a particular context.

Implicitly defining can often become dangerous to the goals of compositionists; Patricia Roberts-Miller explains that “The more that we take certain positions for granted, the more that we are able to achieve consensus by dismissing or ignoring alternate arguments, the more that our discourse assumes values and even terms at odds with the public, then the harder it will be for us to get the public to see the value of what we do” (227). The debate is not merely between student definitions and instructor definitions, but also between compositions’ ecology of terms and the rest of the world’s view of us. I see the same danger when both trying to convince the public to fund departments teaching FYC, as well as students who we are asking to go with us into discursive terrain that might be unfamiliar. If we are unwilling to make our claims in explicit, clear terms, students and university affiliates may disengage from our work and dub us irrelevant. The stakes are high, if we really believe our work is worthwhile, and Roberts-Miller doesn’t let us settle into fairly standard, implicit understandings: “there are a variety of questions not yet settled... regarding political theory, philosophy of mind, models of the self, pedagogy ... In what kind of public discourse do we want our students to engage?” (224). Definitions are a chance to see how a definition was being articulated at a particular moment and in a context, which leaves room for more critique than an implicit understanding without the potential for rebuttal. Roberts-Miller addresses the very need for definitions as claims of
truth, pointing out that we don’t have to fear all truth-claims if they recognize their contingency: “Must we abandon all search for universals, or could we at least argue about the relative merits of various versions of them – when it is critical, and when is it oppressive?” (224). Despite how uncomfortable we are with fixed meanings that potentially silence difference, there is so much power in the ‘genre’ of definitions, and so much potential for engagement with students on this front.

Roberts-Miller would have us look for a strong in-between as we have students explore the roles of definitions; when she discusses rationality as a key-term in the study of argumentation, she explores exactly the problems I face with the shifting favor and disfavor of definitions and defining:

Those who take the pre-rhetorical stance assume that the term [rationality] has a stable and unproblematic definition; those who take the post-rhetorical stance assume that the term has a stable and discredited definition. My point is that the issue is not settled and that the very term [rationality] is up for argument. And the same is true for many other terms crucial in our discourse – autonomy, argument, community, discourse, neutrality, universality. One criterion we should use for deciding on our definition of these terms is pragmatic – does the definition facilitate a model of public reason that can enable people of different points of view to come together in deliberate, thoughtful, and considered conflict? Does it promote a public sphere of communal inquiry? (17).

I believe that these pragmatic questions can be one of the guiding lights for our students: when an iterative model of definition building can facilitate a model of democracy, citizenship and community that helps diverse people come together without harming each other or ignoring each other, the collaborative process of definition building can be said to be succeeding. That success is, however, only momentary. All definitions are constantly being bent to new ends or shored up to stay as they've been in the past; erosion in unexpected directions is inevitable.

While there are still many directions for this work to take, I hope to carry three lessons with me from the results of this study as I begin teaching courses like “Writing in Democratic Communities.” First, I hope to use both the student definitions here and definitions gained through a revised survey to understand the trends and variety in student definitions of key terms. Valuing the students’ own articulations seems like a really compelling way to begin a course that requires so much personal definition building, but
doing so in class discussion will help students to realize how much of their knowledge is context- and community-based. Secondly, I am impressed with the ways that rhetoric is already being taught using an iterative definition building model at Miami University, even without that name. The results of the survey show that interesting and important strides are being made toward getting students to redefine rhetoric for themselves as including audience analysis, rhetorical appeals, persuasion, and argument strategies in their toolkit of useful academic lenses. Thirdly, I am left wondering how other fields have handled the question of students' transfer of learning with key terms that have many contextual meanings; a future direction I hope to take involves continually seeking interdisciplinary connections to aid my own definitional precision in improving my pedagogies.
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Appendix A: Google Form Survey

Central Terms - ENG 111

Consent Information

I am a graduate student doing research about Rhetoric and Composition at Miami University of Ohio. If you choose to have your answers recorded, they will be used for research to understand how ENG 111 helps students define important writing and civic terms. You must be 18 or older to participate.

If you choose to allow your answers to be a part of this study, you will give a unique identifier so that your first-week answers can be matched to your final-week answers, but your name will never be published in association with your answers.

If you choose not to allow your answers to be a part of this study, there is no penalty to your grade in ENG 111 and your professor will not be informed one way or the other.

If at any point you would like to be removed from the study, there is no penalty for doing so and you simply need to send your unique identifier to taborlm@miamioh.edu.

For questions about the research, please contact me at taborlm@miamioh.edu or my faculty advisor Dr. Jason Palmeri at palmerjr@miamioh.edu. For questions or concerns about the rights of research subjects or the voluntariness of this consent procedure, please contact the Research Compliance Office at Miami: (513) 529–3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu.

Please define each of the following terms in your own words; if you do not know, you may guess or write what you associate with that term.
Rhetoric

Writing

Community

Democracy

Citizenship

Do you consent to have your answers recorded?
If Yes, select Other and write the first two letters of your mother's maiden name, your birth month, and your birth day, ex. RA0513

- If no, you may close out your browser and your answers will not be recorded.
- Other: _______________________

Continue »
Appendix B: Example Case Studies

To be used at various times in the course. (inspiration drawn from Writing the Community scenarios; some of their writing projects took place in the same contexts as these case studies, and I applied them to the Miami University location)

Apply our definitions of community, writing, rhetoric, citizenship, and democracy to the following scenarios and come up with a plan of action for solving the perceived problem. Use any of the points made in the recent readings to back up your point and make clear why you chose it.

1. You are working for the Town of Oxford’s recycling initiative; your instructor has mentioned how she wants your final product (a brochure) to include at least 500 words of entirely new, unquoted text. When you meet with the recycling coordinator from the Town, they tell you that all the information is on the website and that they don’t need any new facts, just new slogans for making recycling more interesting. How do you plan to work on this task? What steps will you take and what will you be worried about as you try to complete your brochure?

2. You are a tutor from a local university for students in an inner-city school system. A student who acts uninterested in being a part of the program comes in, gives you a paper he received a poor grade on, and says, “help me fix it.” How would you perceive his actions? How could you reimagine his actions in the context of community insider-and-outsider interaction? What plans might you enact to improve the interaction that occurs, not just for the single essay but in light of broader group and community dynamics?

3. In your internship with a local environmental non-profit, you are asked to write a proposal that involves significant bias/spin in favor of the non-profit’s goal of installing a new solar plant. How can you ensure that the proposal is ethically written but still fulfills the goals of the non-profit you are working for? Who are some people you might turn to for advice as you write, and sources you might look to for less biased information even if it needs to serve an argumentative purpose? How might you learn about your audience?
4. Your task is to improve voter turnout among college students on your campus, but you are not sure what kinds of documents/media would be effective in changing student’s minds. What would be the steps you’d take to decide your medium of communication, and, given the context of Miami University, how do you expect you would proceed? What are some unconventional venues that you believe, currently, are not promoting voter turnout? Are there deeper reasons why college students don’t vote, and if so, how would you change those?

5. Think about the practices of citizenship/local government involvement that your own family advocates or lives by. Do you ever talk about those values, or do you mostly talk about political issues? How might you start a new ‘tradition’ of civic engagement with your family, or modify one that you already have?

6. You have signed up to study abroad, and while you are there you will be working for an English-language newspaper, aimed at English speakers in the city where you will live. How will you get to know the structure of journalism in a new place? What would be the best first steps for getting ideas for articles you could write, given that you will be new to the area and perhaps only at an intermediate level in the primary language?

7. Find the minutes for a recent town hall meeting, and select an issue that seems to have divided the meeting (lots of commentary, a divided vote). If you were from a nearby community and faced this decision, how would you go about making sure you knew what the local feeling was about the issue, and what the deciding factors are that might return a different result in your community?

8. You are working at a non-profit that claims that it wants to increase “community literacy.” How will you define literacy, including what steps you’ll take to get to know the current struggles of the community and also their successes up till now? What kind of program would you advocate in a community you are familiar with, and why would it work?

9. You’ve been tasked with finding out who the ‘major active non-profits’ in the Cincinnati area are, so that you can find a place for a new non-profit in the network of community engagement. Where will you find these non-profits? Who would you
contact? What kinds of things would you want to ask so that you neither seem like you are trying to take over nor are completely unbiased?

10. You want to have a roundtable discussion among important community leaders to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of recent ‘urban renewal’ efforts in your local community. What kinds of people would you want there, and if you don’t know, start researching the kinds of people involved in non-profits near where you are from. What would each voice bring to the discussion?

11. You’ve been asked to help with an oral history project that will be published in order to celebrate the activities of a local non-profit homeless shelter and soup kitchen. Who will you talk to? Use an actual website for a shelter of this kind to determine what steps you would take in order to get to the ‘heart’ of the experience. Much of your work as a writer in many contexts will have to do with the influential act of describing history: how will you show the work as meaningful, continuing, in need of further support, or some other message you pass along to readers?

12. You have been tasked with making the website for the local Chamber of Commerce appeal more to “young tourists and young residents of this area.” What aspects of the most up-to-date websites would you incorporate? What knowledge of youth culture would you employ to link young people to the positives of this community, and to their chance to be a part of it?

13. You are working with a branch of Upward Bound, which attempts to help students whose families have never gone to college to find affordable ways to gain admittance and career paths that will benefit them. Imagine you are working one-on-one with a student who thinks he or she should just get a job after high school; what information could you show them that might change their minds? How would you counter their points about college debt, their lack of understanding of the career options they could get, and their worry that no one would help them along the way?

14. You are working as an assistant in a free ESL class where you don’t speak any of the native languages of the students. Where on the internet, in your local communities, and in your school contacts will you find resources to help you be effective and also overcome frustrations? Imagine that the instructor for the course seems frustrated as well; how can you be a resource for him or her?
15. You have spent the semester auditing and revising accounting procedures for a local non-profit, using your skills from an accounting major. Who would you need to talk to and write to in order to explain the changes you've made? If you don't know anything about accounting, think about how you would explain assistance offered from one of your skills. What kinds of documents might you produce (emails, memos, step-by-step guides, etc.) for the non-profit and how would they affect the utility of your work?