

Creating a Writer's Identity on the Boundaries of Two Communities of Practice

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Abstract

In this case study, we explore the way one student, who aspired to become a professional writer, learned through her writing activity in two communities: academia and public relations. We use activity theory to conceptualize the student's learning as an activity that balances between individual agency in meaning making and the social, historical and cultural forces that shape how individuals make meaning. Perceiving the two settings as communities of practice that provided opportunities for pursuing shared enterprises and engaging in collective learning, we show how the student's simultaneous participation in these contrasting communities challenged and refined her understanding of what it means to be an effective writer. We discuss how the work she engaged in on the boundaries of two writing communities enhanced her developing identity as a professional writer as she became aware of and tested the limitations of writing in these two communities. Our study shows the benefit of providing opportunities for teachers and students to explore how contrasting communities of practice define successful writing activity and how writing activity operates in the cultural and political sphere of each community.

Introduction

In this case study, we explore the way one student, who aspires to become a professional writer, learns through her writing activity in two communities: academia and public relations. During the second semester of her senior year, our focus student, Erin Peterson, writes during an internship with the college's public relations office (one for which she receives academic credit) and writes for other classes in which she is enrolled. Thus, she negotiates how to write both as a worker in the world of public relations and as a student in the academy. We contend that Erin's simultaneous participation in both of these communities refines her understanding of what it means to be an effective writer. In fact, we argue that, for Erin, this work she does on the boundaries of two writing communities is transforming, and her developing identity as a professional writer is enhanced as she becomes aware of and tests the limitations of writing in these two communities.

Much current research in composition focuses on how writers, genres, and social settings influence the activity of writing. For example, in their work *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Settings*, Dias, Freedman, Medway & Paré (1999) examine writing

activity in both workplaces and academia, describing how writing in the workplace is a means to an end, while writing in school tends to “assume a distinct identity and seeming autonomy” so that writing comes to be an end in itself (p. 235). Finding the writing activity in these two communities to be “worlds apart,” these researchers warn against “facile versions” of what Joliffe (1994) refers to as the “myth of transcendence,” the assumption that, while sites of writing may differ, the people who travel between them easily “transport or translate what they have learned as writers from one domain to the other” (Dias et al., 1999, p. 223).

We seek to investigate the claim made by Dias et al. (1999) that “writing practices in the university do not translate into effective writing within the work setting” (p. 5). We do so through one case study because we seek to examine in depth, in this one case, the way the subject perceives herself to be learning in the two settings. We portray this learning neither as occurring strictly in two “worlds apart” nor as enacting a simple version of the “myth of transcendence.” Rather, we show the complicated negotiation and transition Erin undergoes as she struggles to create coherence between two different writing communities, and how she uses writing to negotiate her identity as a future professional writer.

In our study, we use activity theory to conceptualize Erin's learning as an activity that balances between individual agency in meaning making and the social, historical and cultural contexts that influence how a single writer makes meaning. Activity theory allows us to examine Erin's writing activity as always a social activity, “for even the writer alone in a study is formed by and (potentially) forming the actions of others through the tool of writing” (Russell, 1995, p. 55). We focus on Erin's writing activity as one of many processes of learning and identity transformation that occur through her participation in the social and cultural practices of the two specific communities. In doing so, we adopt Wenger's notion in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (1998) that identity is “a way of being in the world and not equivalent to a self image” (p. 151). It is work in progress shaped by individual and collective efforts to create coherence, “to thread together successive forms of participation in the definition of self” (p. 153). That is, we see the writing activity Erin engages in as a part of an individual and collective process through which she negotiates her developing identity, her way of being a professional writer.

Methodology and Data Gathering

We employ qualitative methods for our analysis in this study using open coding of textual data as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and we draw on a wide range of data mainly collected over one semester. Our focus student, Erin, a second semester senior at the time of this study, had a long acquaintance with Judy, who had functioned as Erin's Writing Lab tutor periodically throughout her four years at Grinnell College. During the semester under study, Judy was also Erin's faculty advisor for her internship in the college public relations office. As a requirement for this course, Erin met with Judy at least once a week and kept an internship journal describing her learning throughout the semester. In addition, she submitted to interviews by both Judy and Jean and made available to us many examples of her writing: a writing history we asked her to

create, the drafts and final papers she wrote for her academic classes¹, the articles and features she produced for her public relations internship², and the journal she kept during her spring break trip to San Francisco as a participant and chronicler of an alternative break trip. In addition, she sent and answered many e-mails during the course of the research and afterward. We supplement this primary data with interviews with her teachers and internship supervisors as well as with other important figures in the two locations in which she wrote.

We focus on Erin because she offers us an “insider’s” view of the process of her development as a writer. That is, in this study we see how a student’s attitudes and reasoning affect her analysis of how her beliefs about writing and her writing self are shaped by two communities. We reason that we can gain the most direct evidence through three methods: posing questions that ask Erin to document her thinking as she engages in the process of writing over time and in varied settings; looking at the products of those writing activities; and considering her evaluation of how the process affects her development as a writer.

We use her words when possible and portray her thoughts in her voice as much as possible. Of course, Erin’s statements about what she believes and why she acts as she does are filtered through the social and political context of her communities, but the large amount of data we gather suggests that what emerges are enduring and salient themes and patterns. We do not claim to present an unmitigated or “genuine” portrait because we are aware that our own decisions about what evidence to use and how to interpret that evidence are also shaped by social and political forces. In general, we resist adding yet another layer of interpretation to Erin’s perceptions; thus, we try to avoid making judgments or evaluative comments about her views. Although we do supplement our primary data with interviews with her teachers and internship supervisor, we use that data only to enhance our understanding of or to contextualize Erin’s perceptions and beliefs. We want to examine how a self-reflective student who aspires to be a professional writer experiences the writing activities designed by the communities in which she writes. We hope to use what we learn about how that student believes she learns to write to inform our own practice as teachers of writing.

Two Communities of Practice

Throughout this study we posit the existence of two communities of practice in which Erin moves: academia, specifically, the culture of our highly selective, small liberal arts college; and public relations, specifically the public relations office at this college undergoing a change in its relation to the rest of the institution. According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice, “created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise,” provide “collective learning” (p. 45); their aim is ultimately to provide a “process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful” (p. 51). By this definition, Erin experiences both academia and the public relations office as communities of practice.

At the time of our study, Erin had been a member of the college’s academic community for three and a half years, and had had occasional professional relationships with the community of public relations throughout the same period. Both Erin and others such as Dias et al. perceive of the two

communities of practice as existing separately and independently. But Erin, through her participation in both, brings the two into relation through her struggle to negotiate her career choice and her values in moving from liberal arts education into public relations. In her internship final paper entitled "Intern(al) Conflict: Internships and the Liberal Arts Education," Erin describes her sense that the college does not fully endorse her internship because it conflicts with its liberal arts mission:

In a liberal arts education, an internship and the applied knowledge that it implies is a deeply troubling concept. An internship is the first step on a slippery slope, funneling students to specific careers earlier and earlier. It is the first step in Grinnell's inevitable decline to the status of a two-year vocational school complete with peppy TV commercials touting its top-of-line-dental hygienist and bartending programs.

By participating in the two communities, she experiences what Wenger calls "the demands of multimembership" ⁴ (1998, p. 159). In one journal entry written about halfway through her internship, Erin describes how she finds herself caught between the academic and administrative side of the college during an encounter with a former professor. Note how she uses the pronoun "we" to refer to herself as a public relations worker:

I am getting into some odd politics here. For instance, yesterday I was walking through the science building and I ran into one of my profs. We got into a conversation regarding my internship here, and she got this really annoyed look on her face and started going on and on about what a horrible job PR does, and how we don't get our facts right and we write like third graders, except with a worse vocabulary. And I know she thought that she wasn't insulting me, at least she didn't act as though I was supposed to take it as a personal attack. It was almost as though I was a confidante – as though I was supposed to say "Yeah, no kidding, they're all a bunch of morons over there at PR, I cannot BELIEVE they're getting paid for the drivel they write." She put me in such an awkward position, I didn't know what to say. So I did the PR thing and evaded the issue. I think I responded by saying something like "I agree that there are a lot of tensions between faculty and administration." And it was a cop-out, probably. It made me sad, though, because she really got up on this high horse about how administration is supposed to be a support for professors, how it's OUR job to find out all the information and make sure all the copy is accurate and read their minds. It was condescending.

Erin's internship journal shows her perception that to be inside, and write in, one community of practice is necessarily to be outside of the other, that the two communities of practice have boundaries that "define them as much as their core" (Wenger, 1998, p. 254). Such a description would not conflict with the view of Dias et al. (1999) that different learning processes occur in each setting: that writing is embedded in the workplace but is taught as a distinct skill in academe.

But we find Erin's learning processes to be more complicated than what Dias et al. describe as participation in two "worlds apart." As Erin's encounter with her professor suggests, Erin

operates in both communities simultaneously, but she is an expert in neither. Thus, Erin's work in the two communities of practice is essentially work on the boundary of each community and between the communities. Working as both an intern in public relations and a student in academe, Erin can let the two worlds talk to each other, at least in her head. Erin sees that, although the two worlds are separate and different, each community exerts similar influence on the writing acceptable in it (the types of audiences addressed, words chosen, and themes explored differ in the two communities, but in both cases the communities limit the choices that community members can make). That is, through her participation on the borders of the two communities of practice, she learns that the tools she chooses to use in public relations and those she uses in academia "carry with them stored knowledge, ways of acting, generic information that prescribes or makes convenient certain ways of writing and precludes others" (Dias et al., 1999, p. 223). By juxtaposing the two communities of practice, Erin is able to see how the tools available in each community can compromise her ability to write honestly and effectively. Through such insights, her struggle to develop as a writer in both communities helps her understand the social and political nature of writing activity and leads her to develop new strategies for achieving her personal and professional writing goals. In this learning she exemplifies Wenger's (1998) claim that these boundary locations are exactly where new knowledge is produced and where, as Wenger argues, "new interplays of experience and competence" occur; in other words, they are "the likely locus of the production of radically new knowledge" (p. 254). Although Erin does perceive that the two communities of practice have conflicting goals and practices, her effort to negotiate the divide between the "worlds apart" is productive for Erin as she is challenged and transformed by the experience.

Erin's Relationship with the Community of Academia

The academic community in which Erin wrote for three and a half years was that of a highly selective liberal arts college. At Grinnell, students are expected to master the skills of argumentation, to research and report on that research, and to analyze texts in support of arguments. Students seldom write "creative" or opinion pieces except as exercises or journal entries, which are typically not evaluated in the same way as are more academic pieces. Students also write frequently and copiously at this college; in fact, in 2000 a college-wide Writing Inventory (<http://www.grinnell.edu/academic/writinglab/guidelines/inventory/>) shows that students are expected to write at least three, and more often five papers in each class. Some of these papers can be lengthy, up to 30 pages. Students are seldom given opportunities to rewrite or to write in stages although some professors do encourage students to revise poorly written work or to build on previous papers for a final paper in the class. The assignments themselves are usually perceived by both student and teacher as a display of what students have learned in the course and as evidence that they understand and can apply the theories in the discipline to new material. In 2001, a faculty committee on writing developed a general list of criteria for writing at the college (<http://www.grinnell.edu/academic/writinglab/guidelines/criteria/>). This list also reveals the academic community's emphasis on argumentation and use of evidence as the highest learning priorities for students.

Throughout her college career, Erin was ambivalent about her writing activity in the academic community. In a series of interviews we conducted with her at the beginning of our study, we asked her to describe her academic writing during the three years she had been at Grinnell. She sees most assignments as formulaic exercises that denied her the opportunity to make meaning. She describes herself as having “regressed” in her writing ability during college. She says that in high school she felt like a good writer, one willing to take risks and look at the world in unique, nonobvious ways. However, in her academic courses at Grinnell she came to think that her professors did not want her to take risks with her writing. Although she routinely earned A's and B's in her courses, she felt alienated from what Elbow calls the “rubber-gloved quality to the voice and register of most academic discourse – not just author evacuated but showing a kind of reluctance to touch one's meanings with one's naked fingers” (1991, p. 145). In an interview, Erin notes, “I'm just writing a paper exactly the same way as everyone else.” In an essay Erin writes comparing two papers, one she'd written for her first year tutorial course and one written for a senior year history course, Erin reiterates her belief that her writing is less readable than it had been when she entered college. However, she does recognize that her writing is more complex and that she is able to “note the complexities and ambiguities within an argument and face them head on. I think it ultimately makes my papers stronger because I can look at issues and not simply gloss over issues that I don't understand or don't want to deal with.”

Erin's view of academic writing as constraining and formulaic is consistent with the view held by many researchers on composition. Much research on writing and the teaching of writing criticizes the teaching of writing that occurs in colleges and universities as inadequate preparation for real-world writing (Dias et al., 1999; Russell, 1999; Elbow, 1991; Geisler, 1994; Hillocks, 1995). As Geisler (1994) notes in *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise*, the sort of expository writing expected as a response to most academic writing assignments positions students as novices (p. 81). Geisler argues that attaining academic literacy has been viewed as a developmental process in which students slowly move toward expertise by being “apprenticed” as students of a discipline through the literacy activity demanded in their coursework. Underlying that view, she claims, is the assumption that “academic expertise is so cognitively complex that we can reasonably expect only some students to master it” (p. 89). Therefore, academic writing assignments often provide supports or scaffolding to move students toward more complex thinking in that discipline and to help students practice the modes of inquiry, the evaluation of evidence, and the theorizing about that evidence that represent the literacy practices of experts. Geisler claims that these approaches to teaching writing construct students as incapable of creating or revising theory and thus deny them access to meaning-making and hence, real learning.

In Erin's discussion of her experience writing in other genres, she highlights the lack of voice and agency she believes is afforded her in the writing activity for the academic community. She finds academic writing limiting because it does not win her the praise and recognition she desires and because it seems to serve no purpose except to earn her the good grades she wants. In Erin's journals and other communications she expresses her desire to have her writing accomplish something, what we will call agency. Her desire for such agency is revealed in the beginning of

her internship journal, when Erin contrasts her view of the writing she does in academia with her new feeling of being “productive” in her workplace writing tasks:

I feel like I'm actually doing something. Sometimes in classes, I just do thousands and thousands of pages of reading, and I don't necessarily feel like I'm getting smarter or doing anything productive. Here, I have a story. I can hold it in my hands and say, “Look, someone did this remarkable thing, and I wrote about it and made them happy. Everyone who picks up this magazine and reads this story will get a glimpse of this person, and get a new understanding of this thing that they did. Because of me.”

Erin continually expresses her desire to be productive and to write to an appreciative audience. In a piece we asked Erin to write about her Writing History, Erin explains that she discovered in middle school that she “could get recognition through [her] writing.” In a note on one of the drafts of that essay, Erin writes:

For a generally shy kid, this [writing] is the best way to be recognized. You can shape the things you are going to present without anyone seeing that you spent five hours on it, when everyone else spent five minutes.

Throughout high school, Erin won awards and received praise for her writing. Erin describes one teacher's comment, “You're a writer,” that was written on a paper her senior year of high school, as “the most powerful compliment” she'd ever received from a teacher.

However, as her Writing History reveals, when Erin arrived at college, her perception of herself as “a brilliant writer” was shaken. After receiving what Erin considered to be low grades (B's) on her first writing assignments, Erin decided that “academics, where my final grade was based on one or two papers, posed too much of a risk. Twenty thousand dollars [the price of yearly tuition at this college] seemed a steep price to pay for failing grades.” Thus, she resolved to “value clarity over creativity, objectivity and distance over warmth and personality” in her writing, and to “suck up to [her] professors...to fit in and ultimately excel, even if it meant [she] would have to lose the voice [she] had worked for years trying to perfect, enlarge, and embody.” In an interview with Jean, she reiterates her complaint that academic writing allows her no voice: “Voice is really important to me so when I'm writing for a professor, or something, I'm not using my voice. I don't care...about it as much.” In this complaint, Erin expresses her difficulty with investing in writing when she sees a professor as the only audience. Dias et al. (1999) delineate why they believe conceptualizing audience is difficult for college writers:

University students typically write solo to audiences of one, who quite likely know more than the writer about the subject who, nevertheless, by convention are committed to reading the entire text (whatever its length) within specified time frames and who value the writing insofar as it reveals and enacts the students' learning. (p. 12)

In her internship final paper, Erin describes the effect of writing in a rigid form for an audience that is unlikely to learn anything from the reading: “We [students in academe] follow tried-and-

true formulas, using distant, institutional voices. We may speak authoritatively, but we do not always speak honestly.”

Because such writing did not satisfy Erin's desire for self-expression and agency, she found “other outlets,” other genres that she believed allowed her to speak more honestly. According to her Writing History, she “wrote for the school paper, and for the admissions office. I wrote for the cross-country yearbook, and I wrote poetry about breakfast cereal on my plan. I wrote for anything that would give me an audience.” Thus, when she had the opportunity to work as an intern for the public relations office, Erin is ecstatic; on the first day, she writes in her journal:

Ahh...fame, fortune, and glory are imminent. I can already tell. Okay, maybe not, but this is going to be a lot better than I anticipated. I wasn't sure quite what to expect, but this is infinitely better than the stuff that I did for the local newspaper during previous summers....

In the same entry, she explains the satisfaction she feels from using writing to give students recognition they do not always get in academia:

Also I like the fact that, for the most part, my job is to make people happy. I am doing a fairly minor press release about a couple students who are doing a science presentation for the campus, and they were giddy that they were going to be in the [local newspaper], and even more giddy that they would get to read the copy before it went to the papers. But they've spent the entire semester putting together their research, and this might be the only public nod they get...You don't get a lot of that in the academic world.

Because Erin desires to receive recognition and “make people happy” in her writing, it is easy to see why she feels a lack of agency in academic writing activity. As Dias et al. (1999) argue, writing at school is a part of what the authors call “facilitated performance” where students are guided through a “carefully shaped context” and a “carefully orchestrated process of collaborative performance” between the instructor and student (p. 203). These authors explain their view that “the object of the activity in the school context is clearly and explicitly for students to learn (with learning to write as a route to, or specialized instance of learning)” (p. 203). Perhaps because the learning goal is implicit rather than explicit in most of her academic classes, Erin views her participation in academic writing activity as helping her learn to write better only in a limited way. That is, she concedes that academic writing has enhanced her analytical abilities, making her arguments stronger, and she recognizes that certain writing experiences in certain courses were transformative for her. However, she does not believe she has done much writing to learn or learning to write in her college experience. For Erin, academic writing is primarily about producing writing that will display her knowledge to earn a good grade and win her the approval of her professors. In contrast, particularly at the beginning of her internship, she believes that the workplace offers her a place where she can be productive and make a difference through her writing activity. Although Dias et al. argue that the workplace operates “as a COP [community of practice] whose activities are focused on material or discursive outcomes, and in which participants are often unaware of the learning that occurs” (p. 189), Erin's unique workplace experience, in which improving her writing is the major goal of

the internship, makes her acutely aware of how she is learning about writing through her internship.

Erin's Relationship with the Community of Public Relations

Erin's relationship to the world of public relations also involves a complicated negotiation to create coherence through her writing in this community of practice. Enmeshed in conflicts over values in this activity system, she learns that her desire for agency and voice is limited in public relations writing activity, too. For example, early in her internship, she describes in her journal her first hint of unusual tension in the workplace, as the office where she works faces a performance evaluation:

I thought everyone was sort of snappy today because I had a bad personality or they hated me because I don't do enough. This may be true, but they are also being audited. I am not sure what that means, exactly, but it's certainly not conducive to pure joy in the office. So I sneak around and don't ask a lot of questions. It's a lot like midsems at Grinnell ... everyone is out of sorts because there's a lot to do, and people start noticing and commenting on all the bad habits that people have. I would sum it up by saying that everyone is saying "fuck" a lot more. (That is probably an inappropriate thing to say. It's true, though.).

As this entry reveals, Erin senses the tension in the office, although the people she works with try not to involve her in the uneasiness associated with this evaluation. Lacking specific knowledge of the conflicts, she compares the tension in the office to tensions in the situation with which she is more familiar: academia ("It's a lot like midsems").

She also becomes increasingly aware of other conflicts in the workplace. In her journal she begins to note the difference between her somewhat privileged status as a student and the relatively powerless status of the workers in the public relations office:

Sometimes I wonder if they are annoyed with the fact that I am a student here. That is a weird thing to say, but I realized, after their big and scary evaluation, that unlike students, they don't have an unending budget. I am getting a small picture of what it is like to be here as a non-student, and I realize how much Grinnell coddles us (students). For instance, all I had to do to get \$500 to run a marathon with all my friends was write TWO PARAGRAPHS. Whereas they have been asking for a color printer – really, a necessity for them – for two years. And their computer systems here aren't even all aligned, so getting a story from one computer to another is a tedious process of exchanging disks and formatting and swearing. I had no idea there was such a contrast between the way they deal with funds for students and the way they deal with funds for the administration.

As she struggles to understand these power relationships that will affect her as a future writer for public relations, she sees that even in this community of practice, her freedom to write for her own purposes will be constrained.

Another conflict also impinges on her writing activity in the community of practice of public relations. At Grinnell during the summer immediately following this semester, the head of the public relations office (Erin's mentor) left her position, an acting director was appointed, and three weeks later an interim director was appointed, a person previously employed by the development office and not experienced in public relations. So for the first time in recent history, the public relations office, instead of serving the development office as one of many clients, reported directly to a member of that office.

As research on public relations in college settings suggests, public relations workers at academic institutions often face tension between the desire to write a good story and the need to appeal to contributors. In an interview shortly after she had resigned her position in the college public relations office, Erin's mentor asserts that "most of the people in my profession prefer not to work for development." She says that "tensions between development offices and public relations offices are very common....Our goals aren't the same. You know, whereas I'm a writer looking to what's in it for the reader, the development officers tend to think about what's in it for themselves or for the college." She cites as examples of the tension the cases of the editors of the Stanford Magazine and the editor of the Pennsylvania Gazette, both of whom left their positions after winning the prestigious Sibley award, which recognizes excellence in alumni magazines. In both cases, the leavings were prompted by tension with the development offices, which wanted the magazine to be aimed more specifically at raising money for the institution. The Chronicle of Higher Education describes the problem in this way: "Alumni-magazine editors say these untimely departures show the extent to which fund raisers are pressuring them to publish news that casts only a positive light on the institutions" (Nicklin, 1996, A23). Erin's mentor says, "I've had conflicts in the past with the development office ... because if you have a choice doing a story about someone who's interesting and someone who given money to the college, [the development office believes] you should do the story about the person who's given money to the college.... I disagree with that."

Erin was aware throughout her internship of these conflicts among motives and actions in the writing activity she did for public relations. Erin learns how professional writers must understand the social and political expectations of the system in which they operate and must translate them into generic choices. For example, she describes in an e-mail communication how, in writing an article about an important college donor, she would have to balance the interests of various players in the organization:

It would have to be okayed not only by my editor and the [person] I'm writing about, but also people like ... [Grinnell College's director of development] and

... [the interim director of public relations, a former employee of the development office]. So I have to make something that

A. Provides a flattering enough image of the [person] so that the big cheese will give approval.

B. Doesn't make ... [her mentor] gag with its syrupy disgustingness. (She's an editor. It would be gross if she let the really wretched stuff go by. And [she], like any editor, has her idiosyncrasies about the way she liked things written. I tried to abide by those things.)

C. The development folks think is properly chipper, and appropriately coddles their moneybags superstars.

D. People *might* read.

E. Doesn't make me toss myself into a mud puddle for shame.

As this discussion suggests, when Erin decides how to write different sorts of pieces in public relations, she understands that genres, as Russell (1997) explains, "are not merely texts that share some formal features: they are shared expectations among some group(s) of people ... ways of recognizing and predicting how certain tools, in certain typified—typical, reoccurring—conditions, may be used to help participants act together purposefully" (p. 513). And as the above quote from her journal reveals, Erin is growing in her understanding that it is not solely writing for the academy that imposes "cultural imperatives of the group or system" (Dias et al., 1999, p. 21). As in all communities of practice, writers in public relations or other work cultures "may experience its genres as straitjackets" (Dias et al., 1999, p. 21).

Erin's Writing Activity in Academia

Experiencing the contradictions between and within the activity systems of public relations and academia, Erin brings the two into a relationship through her writing activity, learning in both how to use the genres, with their constraints and possibilities, to negotiate her identity as a writer. In academia, Erin's writing follows a process of negotiation in what Dias calls the "subtle interplay of various, often conflicting motives" (p. 115). In Erin's case, these motives include her professors' goal to encourage and guide students as they learn to think and write well in their disciplines, and Erin's goals to earn good grades, to please her professors, and to be personally fulfilled through writing. In "Role Playing: Direct Address and Status in Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," the paper Erin writes for her women's history class, she works through 10 drafts, making organizational and vocabulary choices that reveal her responsiveness to these different and sometimes conflicting motives.

"Role Playing" focuses on Harriet Jacobs' book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, originally published in 1861, in which a black woman, a former slave, seeks to educate her contemporary white audience about the horrors of slavery. As a part of their discussion of this text, the class has considered how Harriet Jacobs "constructs herself on the page" in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The assignment Erin chooses offers explicit language directing what content the writer should focus on and provides clear direction:

.... [T]ake a position on how and why Jacobs depicts herself and her "status".... [W]rite an analysis of Jacobs' memoir, which treats it as a construction while taking very seriously the message embedded in the

construction....and focus on the choices Jacobs-the-author made in depicting her power and her powerlessness.

Through this detailed assignment, the professor provides her students with developmental schema to support them as student writers, just as Geisler (1994) argues many professors do. It is interesting that Erin does not find this detailed and directive assignment to be constraining or formulaic. She tells us in an interview that she welcomes the help the professor gives her in organizing the paper and providing a focus for her analysis: "If she had just said, 'Write a paper,' I would have had a really hard time." The assignment points students toward the issues appropriate to the genre of historical analysis: issues of status and power, the construction of messages, and the recognition of historical context. Erin uses the scaffolding provided in the assignment and approaches the assignment strategically. The following excerpt from the first paragraph of her final and 10th draft of "Role Playing" reveals how Erin mirrors the language of the assignment, as indicated by our underlining:

As a southern black woman attempting to motivate her audience of northern white women to abolish slavery, she faces the difficult task of aligning herself with the reader without alienating herself from them. To do this, she must carefully negotiate her status; that is, the way she positions herself in relation to her audience of white women. Jacobs constructs her status both as a slave who is speaking to her superiors and as a woman who is speaking to her equals. These two statuses allow her to examine slavery on two levels: as a slave, she evokes pity in the reader, and as a woman, she evokes empathy. Through her direct addresses, we can see how she constructs herself both as a helpless victim of an oppressive institution and as a powerful voice for all women.

Other evidence of Erin's understanding of the generic expectation embedded in this community of practice is revealed in her consideration of the term "direct address." Erin labels the term in her fifth draft as "Too Englishy" and deletes it. When we ask her later what she meant by "Too Englishy," she responds in an e-mail:

I think I meant I did the same sort of analysis that I would do if I were writing an english [sic] paper ... its evidence was based on narrative technique, which seemed to me to be too slippery to base my historical argument on. (Does that make sense at all?)

Erin eventually decides to reintroduce the concept of direct address into the final draft of her paper, but she reaches this decision only after she considers the generic differences between writing in history and English. Erin's explanation that an analysis of narrative technique may not provide convincing evidence in an historical argument (and by implication for a history professor) reveals her sensitivity to such perceived generic differences.

Erin's attention to both the assignment and the quality of her argument is also revealed in her careful analysis of how Jacobs constructs herself as someone whom the reader will pity and with whom the reader will identify. Erin refines her wording through several drafts to better reflect the complex relationship constructed between Jacobs and her reader. For example, Erin

decides that she needs to refine her word choice to better express her theory by substituting “empathy” for sympathy in this sentence “...she evokes pity in her reader and as a woman, she evokes empathy.” Here she demonstrates the kind of care she takes both to fulfill the professor’s assignment and to reflect the complexity of Jacobs’ writing.

Erin’s paper earns her an A and positive comments from her professor. The professor’s comments at the end of the paper describe Erin’s work as “a very persuasive and interesting piece of interpretation.” And the professor adds: “Let’s put it this way; it’s 10:30 on Friday night, yours is my last paper...and I had no trouble keeping my focus while reading it. That’s high praise indeed!” However, when we later interviewed this professor, she described Erin’s paper as “lacking the spark of creativity” she looks for in students’ work. As Erin’s Writing History tells us, Erin believed that reaching for such creativity, which she equated with pushing against the constraints she felt in her academic writing, would not be worth the risk of a poor grade. Perhaps that cautious balancing of motives explains her careful fulfillment of the assignment.

However, Erin tells us in an interview a year later that she worked especially hard on this paper because it met a personal need for her. Although for other papers she often played with language and made editorial corrections, she had rarely made the kind of “major structural changes” that she made for this one. In this interview, Erin attributes her hard work to her feelings for this class: “Other classes were distanced or removed; women’s history is about me... Now I can consider myself a feminist and not be embarrassed about it...The class changed my entire outlook—it was the best class I’ve ever taken.” Perhaps because she found the class engaging, she found her writing activity for this class personally transforming. When she got the paper back and reread it, she found herself proud and surprised by what she discovered in her paper: “I thought ‘wow! I never thought of this before! It’s smart! It’s true!’”

In another paper Erin writes for her Russian literature class during the semester, she stretches the genre of literary analysis and takes more creative risks than she had in her women’s history paper. As Dias et al. (1999) argue, genres often constrain and limit, but they also can be potential spaces for identity transformation and learning:

...we need to argue also for the potentialities of genres for creating spaces for forming and realizing new versions of self as one discovers new motives and transforms the self in response to the new communicative needs and opportunities. (p. 21)

In her Russian literature paper, Erin does appear to use the “opportunity space” (a phrase Dias et al. [1999, p. 21] attribute to Bazerman) available to her to experiment by blending the genres of journalistic writing and literary analysis. In this paper, “Dmitr’i’s Song: Intertextuality between the Brothers Karamozov and Hanson’s ‘Weird,’” Erin plays creatively with resources of the genre of literary analysis. In this piece, her discourse is more confident and self-assertive than that of a novice and the genre is less formal and “author evacuated” (Elbow, 1991) than typical student literary analysis. In this paper, Erin compares the themes of alienation and powerlessness in Dostoevsky’s novel and in Hanson’s popular song. Erin realizes that her choice of topic is risky because most paper assignments at this college do not encourage students to refer to or

include artifacts of popular culture as evidence for argument. When she receives the paper and comments back from her professor, Erin tells us in a note, "I got this in the mail from Prof. Mohan and didn't bother looking at it...I'm too embarrassed." Her embarrassment results partly from her uncharacteristic haste in writing the paper and partly from her awareness that the topic was risky.

Despite her embarrassment, Erin might have done well to reflect closely on the professor's comments and the grade. She receives a B/B+ on the paper, and the professor's comments are very positive. At the end of the paper, he praises the originality of her work: "Your work is original in its conception and it's ably executed. I found it consistently engaging."

Although the paper is a somewhat successful performance for the academy, both the topic and the structure of this paper notably differ from Erin's other academic papers. To begin the paper, Erin creates an instructive conversation between a fellow senior and herself. Instead of envisioning her reader as a captive audience of one professor, who will read the paper only as evidence that she has learned what is expected in the course, she constructs the reader as someone whose attention she hopes to gain and keep in her paper. The conversation that introduces the thesis of the paper echoes the dialogue and informal language typical of a public relations piece:

"You're reading Dostoevsky?" sneers a fellow senior, a science major. "Good God, why?" he asks in a condescending voice. "Not only is he dead, but he writes in another language. Yech. How irrelevant."

My friend says this mostly in jest, but the sentiment is not uncommon—if a topic is not immediately relevant to day-to-day life, it is inherently irrelevant.

"Irrelevant? Not a chance," I say. "Dostoevsky writes about things that are universal to all humans. He is just as relevant today as he was over 100 years ago."

"Oh really?" he says. He sees a challenge.

"Yep. You can see the same things being discussed today in everything from talk shows to pop music." I pull out a CD from my backpack. It is Hanson, the top-selling teeny bop group in the nation. I flip it open and pull out the lyrics.

The challenge has begun.

In the margin next to this conversation, the professor writes, "Good 'hook,' as in show biz," indicating that he reads the text with an understanding of her journalistic approach to both topic and structure of the piece.

Erin does produce an uneven level of discourse in the piece. In several places in her essay, the professor warns her to avoid "reportorial" wording because it does not communicate the complexity of the connections she wants to make. The professor also comments on her inappropriate use of jargon or slang in the text. Erin may be "lapsing" into journalistic discourse because she has chosen a topic for her paper that, through its popular culture subject, invites less

formal, academic prose. Since she is immersed in the communities of practice of public relations and academia, it is understandable that Erin might try out language she has found freeing in her writing for public relations in her academic writing, but she nonetheless follows the rules of the genre of literary analysis as she simultaneously resists them. Because Erin pays attention to imagery and creates credible parallels between the imagery and structures of the two texts, she fulfills the generic expectations of literary analysis. But, perhaps because of Erin's stretching of the genre and self-confident discourse, Erin's professor reads this essay as more than a demonstration that she has read and understood Dostoevsky. He responds to her as a fellow reader, one willing to learn from her. After she has given this explanation for her conception of interdiscursivity "—that artists are constantly in dialogue with one another, interacting with texts that came before them—can also suggest an unwitting collaboration," the professor writes in the margins: "I'm currently working on a paper dealing with intertextuality. May I use your nice formulation here? With attribution, of course." As this comment suggests, Erin, through this paper, becomes more than the novice that academic discourse demands of her; she acts not just to reproduce knowledge but to create it as well.

The above examples show how Erin, through her generic choices in her writing activity, negotiates among competing motives in academia to achieve personal and community goals. She seeks to get good grades and to please her professors, but she also develops more understanding of herself (as a feminist, as a popular culture enthusiast, and as an aspiring writer) as she creates knowledge about her topics. While the genre constrains her in some ways, it also enables her to learn through writing, one of the goals of academic writing. As this examination of her process reveals, she is indeed learning to negotiate "the interplay between various and often conflicting motives" (Dias et al., p. 115) in her developing identity as a writer.

Erin's Writing Activity in Public Relations

In public relations, Erin's writing activity follows a process of negotiation among conflicting motives comparable to the process she follows in academia. In the genre choices Erin makes for the feature article "Alternate Reality" in the *Grinnell Magazine*, she reveals her negotiation among the motives of journalist, fundraiser, and student. In this article she describes an Alternative Break trip, one of several excursions organized each college break by the college's Community Service Office to provide students the opportunity to engage in socially beneficial projects. Showing students engaged in such projects fulfills two goals for this college: first, the journalistic goal of telling a good story that engages and instructs the reader, and second, the development goal of encouraging alumni readers to donate money by demonstrating that the college encourages its students to practice social responsibility. This theme has long been part of the college's identity and is gaining new emphasis as the college collectively seeks to define its values during a time of turmoil in the college's leadership.⁵

Through her negotiations, Erin comes to understand that her audience in the genre of public relations differs from that for her academic papers. In an interview, Erin tells us that at first when she writes for public relations she envisions an academic audience, "some professor" reading it;

however she then realizes that “the only people who are gonna be reading it are like people who are kind of flipping through it ... just sitting ... down to dinner, so, like you want to capture their attention....” As she chooses which details to use and which to omit, as she selects her emphasis and shapes her material, she keeps in mind the audience she imagines for this genre: a person flipping through the magazine as she or he sits down to dinner, a reader whose interest she has to grab.

In Erin's account, she seeks to grab the attention of this reader through a succinct, attention-getting opening:

Saturday, March 21, 1998: 11:30 p.m.

I am sitting in a country western gay bar in the middle of San Francisco with a Catholic priest and a sloe gin fizz. I knew alternative spring break would be different from anything I'd ever experienced. I had no idea how much....

She also gains the sympathy of her audience through the persona she establishes as a neophyte do-gooder; this persona also presumably fulfills personal goals by allowing her to express her discomfort at her outsider status. In the article, she sets herself up, accurately enough, as a nervous newcomer to this world of socially responsible action, much as she might imagine the reader to be. Using the voice of a confessional journalist, she describes her apprehensions succinctly, concretely, and humorously:

We huddle on the platform, awaiting our train. The 12 of us are virtual strangers to one another, so we make small talk or feign interest in our fingernails. I grind snow into the platform with the heel of my shoe, avoiding eye contact.

I am nervous. I am an athlete, a meat-eater, and a senior. I am positive my fellow travelers will all be hippie, vegan first years who hate me for my Nikes and my penchant for McDonald's burgers.

Not only that, but I haven't volunteered an hour in my life. For four years I have been attending a school that touts its reputation for social action and responsibility, but the only responsible thing I've done on a regular basis is recycle my Dr. Pepper cans.

Thus she sets up a persona not as a proselytizer whose confidence might put off potential readers and donors, but as a self-deprecating tentative member of the expedition.

Erin also attends to the expectations of a public relations genre when she omits from the article controversial information that might distract from its focus on college students doing good. For example, the private journal that she uses as raw material for the article records her ambivalence about the priest who guides the students through some of their activities. Before she meets him, she knows from the stories of others who had met him previously that he was “confrontational and tough, that he liked men better than women, that he would get us drunk and not get us home till after 3 am.” She describes his role in her private journal:

River ministers on the streets. He is "pastor" to homeless gay male prostitutes; he practices "harm reduction," a common phrase bandied about the homeless shelter, soup kitchens, and needle exchanges, which means he does whatever he can to make sure that when these boys (and they were boys – often 14 or 15) engaged in unsafe activities, he made them as safe as possible. We made the rounds with him, handing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, condoms, lube, and needles.

She records in this private genre some observations that raise controversial questions: Is harm reduction the most useful strategy for dealing with prostitution? Should aid focus on giving these young men alternatives to prostitution, rather than reducing harm in that pursuit, by dispensing condoms and lube for example? Erin, recognizing that the genre of the college alumni magazine is unsuited to such difficult questions, decides to omit some details that raise these questions.

When she writes about him in the genre of the magazine article, she focuses on the dedication and caring he devotes to his ministry. She reveals sympathy for his mission, conveying the harsh details but cushioning them in a straightforward understanding of the world he inhabits and the good he accomplishes:

Sporting a backwards baseball cap, a pullover sweater, and baggy shorts with a chain-link key chain, he does not look the part of a priest. His speech, peppered with obscenities and crude references, reflects the world where he lives.

Tonight, as he does every night, he sauntered down the streets of his neighborhood, handing out sandwiches, clean needles, and condoms to any of the boys he saw. He knows them all by name.

He has long since stopped trying to save the world, or even his small piece of it in the heart of the Tenderloin. By giving out needles, food, and protection, he hopes only to keep this part of the world from total destruction. Once a gay male prostitute himself, River knows exactly how difficult it is to escape street life. (Peterson, 1998, p. 20)

Here Erin makes genre choices, leaving out her personal reaction, the priest's attitude toward women, and the lube with its unmistakable suggestion of homosexual activity. Instead, she conveys a picture of him that focuses on the good he tries to do while also recognizing carefully his humanity and his limits.

Erin also adapts to the audience of her genre when she describes her relationship with other group members, again leaving out details that would conflict with the picture of students doing good. Erin's private journal records her frustration with occasional irresponsible behavior by her fellow students. For example, she describes her group's abuse of the hospitality of the church that had hosted them, describing her group as "a self-centered lot" and noting "good lord, did we stink up the place." Similarly, some of her private journal entries record in lurid detail adventures that are clearly illegal for a group in which most students were not of legal age to drink; for example, she describes a foray that ends with a student "puking in a plastic paper bag" and then

“kneeling down and bracing himself on the curb, throwing up.” She emphasizes that, when she glimpsed this image, she mistook this student for “a homeless drunk.”

In her finished article, Erin shapes her account of the drinking so as to convey it without overemphasizing it. In this version, she makes only a short and vague reference to drinking: “Right now, we are passing around a Ruby Red Squirt, but it is not the only liquid we will consume tonight” (Peterson, 1998, p. 21). But she does not emphasize the effects of the carousing as she does in her private journal. Instead of focusing on her frustration with the activities of her fellow students, she focuses on the goals and accomplishments of the trip. For example, she gives a strong sense of the group as a cohesive unit when she describes their common feelings when they are traveling home on the train:

Scene on train: We are on the train home. I am perched on the armrest of my seat, talking to Marisa and James. We are reliving the past two weeks, recalling the surprising details, funny quotes, and fascinating people. “Remember when River tried to buy Bryan a pack of cigarettes -- and he doesn't even smoke?” laughed Ariane.

“Or when the college kid we met from Washington asked us about potatoes when we told him we were from Iowa?” I added, rolling my eyes.

“Or when Shannon asked if it was a sin to shower in a church on Sunday?” said Marisa.

Notebook in hand, I begin writing down these sound bites. Soon, others are joining us, adding their own memories, looking over my shoulder. Twenty minutes later, all 12 of us are huddled around the notebook, adding to and editing the list. Each brief anecdote is punctuated by laughter or knowing nods. Other passengers look on, both interested and jealous of our tightly knit group. (Peterson, 1998, p. 21)

Her clear goal here is to convey to the audience of potential alumni donors a picture of an accomplished, cohesive, fulfilled group.

At the same time that she adheres to the demands of the genre, Erin works to convey an accurate version of events. In an early draft of the article, her editor suggests that the end of the article focus on the effects of this trip on the possibility of future volunteering: “future vol? Inspired you to do more?” Despite these leading questions, Erin resists that line of development. Her private journal entry provides a clue as to why, when she describes in this private genre her preference for order and goal-oriented activity, qualities she finds missing in the trip:

If nothing else, this trip has helped me discover that what I enjoy doing is not simply a product of habit. I thought that being with a group that has such different personalities from mine would help me realize different parts of my personality, maybe help me discover something I enjoyed that I wouldn't have realized otherwise. Not that I thought this 2 weeks wasn't valuable, not that I won't volunteer in the future, but I realize what I love about sports groups. I love the discipline, the routine, the dedication. I love the profound

respect we have for meeting deadlines and goals, our tendency toward structure.

Erin resists her editor's urging to finish the story with a claim of inspiration and future dedicated volunteering. Instead, she chooses to end with a neutral image of the students returning home on the train:

One by one, our overhead lights click off for the night. We will not wake up until our conductor announces first call for breakfast, two hours from Ottumwa.

We are 15 hours from Grinnell, but we are already home. (Peterson, 1998, p. 21)

Erin's choices in this article reveal how she seeks both to comply with the genre expectations of the alumni magazine article and to convey her honest response to the trip. Generally, she attempts to provide what alumni readers might wish to hear and the public relations office might wish to convey: college students doing good in the world. However, she also tries to be accurate in conveying her sense that the students accomplished less than they might have. In negotiating among these varying demands and constraints, she pushes up against and tests the constraints of genre, thus developing identity as a writer for public relations.

Conclusion

Reviewing Erin's writing activity in the communities of practice of academia and public relations creates a portrait of a writer negotiating her identity as she becomes aware of and contends with the constraints of the genres she chooses to use. In working with and resisting the constraints of academic writing, Erin gains an understanding of how she can challenge the genre's positioning of her as a novice who lacks agency. In experimenting with the genre of public relations writing, she enjoys its freedoms while learning about and challenging its constraints as well. Erin's internship in public relations transforms her attitudes toward the college and toward college writing, as she reveals in her final essay for the internship. In this description of her learning in the internship, Erin writes that her choice to complete an internship is dangerous. She explains her belief that in her role as both a student and intern, she is crossing boundaries and taking on roles that some in the college would disapprove of. And she further politicizes the experience with her assertions in her internship final paper that "I am a pesky guerilla warrior, sneaking from the ivory towers to the gritty streets, acquiring the one thing professors loathe most: experiential knowledge." In this essay, Erin depicts herself as a warrior occupying new territory, and she sees her branching out into new writing activity as a political act, one that challenges what she perceives to be a stuffy, conservative community of practice in academia:

After four years, my papers became more concise and more accurate. But they were drier than the Sahara desert. Tethered (and sometimes shackled) to form, I crammed my ideas into the skeleton of hypothesis→evidence. I was

given a frame; my job was to fit pieces of proof into the confines of this frame.

As do Dias et al. (1999), Erin depicts her work in the two communities of practice in architectural terms: "My internship offered a unique opportunity to integrate academic and applied knowledge; if the goal of a liberal arts education is to create floor space in the mind, an internship creates the opportunities for entirely new levels." We also want to make clear that these struggles to fashion new spaces in the architecture available to her are political choices that signal her resistance to practices that constrain her desire to be both creative and truthful.

Examining how Erin participates as a writer in the two communities of practice requires that we consider the often-conflicting motives and power relations Erin must understand and negotiate successfully in her writing activity. As Russell (1999) reminds us:

Our discipline's motive is to provide tools (commodified knowledge) to other activity systems, so they can better understand and use this marvelous tool called "writing together" to harness for good the variety and power human beings have in this protean technology. And to do so we might do well to understand the (power) relations mediated by the genre systems (writing processes) of school and society (p. 91).

Of course, Erin's story of negotiating the transition between writing for academia and writing for work is unique. But her experience suggests one way in which students might learn about writing in different communities. Erin's consciousness of her identity as a writer is heightened by her work on the boundaries of two contrasting communities of practice as she thinks about and comes to understand the constraints and freedoms afforded by each community. Her participation in the two communities of practice enhances her understanding of writing as a complex interaction between the writer's identity and social cultural practices of the community. As do Dias et al. (1999), we see that the ways of learning about writing and the purposes of writing activity in academic and workplace communities of practice can differ, but we learn through this study that Erin benefits more from her participation in each because of her participation in both.

In considering the implications of this finding for the teaching of writing in colleges and universities, we discover that Erin's academic writing experience might have been more powerful for her if she had felt more agency in her writing activity. As Dias et al. (1999) remind us, too often students perceive the writing they do for college as an end in itself. As Erin's experience exemplifies, many do not view writing as a means of discovering something or of gaining new understanding. Teachers can help students understand that writing activity offers opportunities to gain new understanding. In addition, they can, as Erin's history professor does, structure assignments so as to communicate the genre expectations for a discipline as ways of knowing and being. Teachers can also invent projects where writing becomes more clearly a means to an end, to "constitute the class as a working group with some degree of complexity, continuity, and interdependency of joint activity" in order to mirror the rich "communicative relations that contextualize writing in the workplace" as Dias et al. (1999, p. 235) advocate.

In contrast to Dias et al., who depict writing activity in the academy as a solitary act for an audience of one, teachers of writing need to help students reconceptualize all writing activity as collective work. As Journet (1999) reminds us, "Because genres represent socially constructed forms of typicality, they are property of communities, the patterns of social life operative within particular groups of people" (p. 100). When students write in a college class, they do not write for the professor solely, nor do they write alone. Instead, writing activity is one means through which all members of a liberal arts college community work together to both reinscribe and redefine the community's and individual participants' values. Thus, as Erin comes to realize through her work on the boundaries of academia and public relations, all writing activity involves its participants in power relations through which they continually renegotiate and redefine their identities.

Finally, we believe it is not enough simply to advocate that academic or workplace communities of practice mirror each other, although practices in one may enhance writing activity in the other. Rather, our study shows the benefit of providing opportunities for teachers and students to explore how contrasting communities of practice define successful writing activity and how writing activity operates in the cultural and political sphere of each community. Thus, we believe, academic communities of practice should provide students with opportunities to write in non-academic contexts and should encourage students to reflect about and discuss how these non-academic contexts frame writing activity. At the same time, students may benefit from discussing how the academic contexts in which college writing often occurs also affect writing activity. Such discussions should include how writing activity, both in academia and in other contexts, is a means of operating purposively in the world. While we have focused on how one student uses her experience on the boundaries of two communities to develop as a writer, future research may explore ways that student and teachers together can examine how communities of practice, through the writing activity they encourage, create and value knowledge. Academic communities of practice can encourage students to develop the self-reflexivity that will enable them to chart their own identity definition and to understand the power relations they engage in as they write. By doing so, students are more likely to learn from their writing activity and to gain the agency that makes writing activity meaningful to writer and reader alike.

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Notes

¹ These included papers written for courses in Women's History and Russian literature, and a summary paper about her internship.

² These include articles written for the public relations office's flagship publication, the Grinnell Magazine, disseminated to all Grinnell alumni. In addition, she wrote for other areas of public relations as well: press releases, nomination descriptions for graduation speakers, a feature describing the benefits the college received from a Hewlett grant, and an article describing the college's presidential search for the campaign newsletter.

³ Wenger argues that learning occurs through social participation in learning communities, a participation that entails active participation in the "practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). All of us belong to many communities of practice, and participation in all of these communities contributes to our identity formation.

⁴ After the college's president of seven years resigned effective December 31, 1997, the college was run during this spring semester by an acting president. During the same semester, the faculty, in the midst of a self-study for North Central Association accreditation and a governance struggle with the trustees, approved a list of core values that

included “an ethic of social responsibility and action” (Grinnell College North Central Association Self Study Report, 36).