2011

Rethinking Success: A Person-Based Approach to Service Learning

Ryan Cales
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2421

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
RETHINKING SUCCESS: A PERSON-BASED APPROACH TO SERVICE LEARNING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

RYAN E. CALES
Master of Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011
Bachelor of Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Director: DR. DAVID J. COOGAN
Associate Professor, Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2011
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother and my brother for their endless love and support. I would like to thank Dr. David Coogan for his guidance and encouragement throughout this project and my entire graduate career, as well as Dr. Les Harrison, Dr. Elizabeth Hodges, and Dr. Victoria Shivy for their assistance and direction with this project. Also, I would like to thank Suzanne Shultz and the staff of District One Parole Office in Richmond, Virginia for giving me the opportunity to work with Working with Conviction. Lastly, I would like to thank all of the participants of Working with Conviction for letting me be a part of their lives. Our time together means the world to me.
# Table of Contents

Abstract                                                      iii  
Introduction                                                  1  
“Tactics and Tactical Thinking”                                8  
“What Lies Beneath in Richmond, Virginia: Materialism and *Working with Conviction*” 20  
“Agency and the Layers of Need”                                36  
“Working with *Working with Conviction*”                       49  
Conclusion                                                   64  
Works Cited                                                  66  
Appendix A: *Working with Conviction* Pamphlet                 70  
Appendix B: Nancy’s Final Draft in Workshop I                  71  
Appendix C: Janice’s Final Draft in Workshop II                72  
Appendix D: Nancy’s Final Draft in Workshop II                 74
Abstract

RETHINKING SUCCESS: A PERSON-BASED APPROACH TO SERVICE LEARNING

Ryan Cales, Master of Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Major Director Dr. David Coogan, Associate Professor, Department of English

This thesis explores the nature of service learning projects that are structured to make interventions in rhetorical spheres and seek to achieve social change on a smaller scale rather striving for grander, or even systemic, change. In structuring community projects that include inherently limited interventions and equally limited goals, I argue that such projects should be open to immediate adjustments within themselves—to abandon any particular form or goal—to satisfy the immediate needs of the individuals served. I draw upon my work with a reintegration program for ex-offenders in Richmond, Virginia called Working with Conviction to help demonstrate that service learning constituents who create community projects need to be acutely attuned to the temporal and spatial constraints of any project, the ideological commitments of the relevant community, and the various locations of agency that can be affirmed and explored regarding the individuals served.
Introduction

*In “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change,” Ellen Cushman urges that in order for activism to have any impact, community workers need to recalibrate what actually counts as social change. She argues that we cannot measure success in our community work merely on some large scale of “sweeping social upheavals,” but instead, we must take into account “the ways in which people use language and literacy to challenge and alter the circumstances of daily life […] when the regular flow of events is objectified, reflected upon, or altered” (240). The sort of events Cushman lists that illustrate her involvement in social change, perhaps “overlooked or underestimated with the emancipatory theories we currently use,” include things like assisting individuals with writing resumes and job applications or writing recommendations to potential employers and landlords (“Rhetorician” 240-241). The goal for Cushman’s vision of social change is not systemic liberation or reformation. Rather, it is to utilize the day-to-day moments in which our teaching and research can help individuals on a smaller level so they can, and hopefully will, assert their agency to solve their own social problems (“Rhetorician” 249).

What is compelling about Cushman’s activism is that it forces service learning constituents of all kinds—teachers, students, organizations, and everyone and everything else in between—to assess what is immediately at issue in the everyday and try to form ways to intervene to create meaningful change on a smaller scale.

* Everyone a part of the workshops discussed has signed consent forms to allow me to include them, and all of their names have been changed to pseudonyms.
This degree of change was the goal for the rounds of writing workshops I was privileged to lead for ex-offenders at a reintegration program facilitated by the District One Parole Office in Richmond, Virginia, called Working with Conviction (WwC). As a blunt depiction of the project’s exigency, the ex-offenders I worked with needed help getting jobs. In order to help them get their feet in employers’ doors and alter the “regular flow of events” in their lives, a two-week writing workshop that met two hours a week (and eventually, a subsequent two-week workshop) was planned. The participants were to write personal statements that addressed their past experiences—their conviction and incarceration—and how they are now committed to change. Having these personal statements in a ready stance was intended to empower the participants to go out and use them in the real world. By helping the participants write these statements, I was helping them attempt to alleviate an immediate problem—their unemployment—that is connected to a much larger one: namely, combating and subverting the stigma that surrounds ex-offenders and inhibits them from fully reentering society.

If we are to take Cushman’s suggestions to help in the day-to-day moments seriously, we need to ensure that we as community workers are capable of identifying what is actually at stake in the day-to-day that hinders individuals from acting in the world and gaining these little victories. Concerning the ex-offender, this means that community workers need to be familiar with the pressures that push back on the person in need when he/she tries to reintegrate into society, and are able to formulate ways to help him become active in the world around him. Broadly speaking, we need to ensure that community workers create ways that help cultivate and affirm agency that is necessary for ex-offenders to gain a voice in their communities. As Linda Flower argues in Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement, our role as
scholars and students is to carefully “[draw] out, [document], and [give] visibility and presence to the agency of someone else” (216-217). Similar to Cushman, what is important to Flower is not creating global change with any problem. Rather, the goal for Flower is to find ways to help everyday people prepare themselves to respond to a problem and try to open up a place for public dialogue in an attempt to create social change (206). Within this vision of engagement, the scholar and the student need to be able to understand how to effectively help the people they serve become agents in their worlds in hopes that they can successfully take them on.

Drawing out agency was a necessary goal with the writing at WwC. Though I do not think that writing personal statements without the intention to go out in the world and use them is a fruitless endeavor (and will argue later that it is not), not putting the paper in the hands of employers demonstrates a lack of agency that is essential to reintegrating: if one is not ready to publicly admit to their transgressions and demonstrate they have recovered, then one ostensibly is not ready to reenter society. It was difficult, at times, helping the WwC participants given the mass of factors weighing the participants down as agents. In working with ex-offenders, it was not surprising to hear from the group members that the stigma surrounding felons was severely inhibiting their success in securing employment. What was surprising in our sessions was the multitude of problems that surfaced through their writing. Through a writing workshop designed to help gain employment, stories of physical abuse, broken relationships, and family issues emerged. More importantly, though most of the issues depicted happened in their pasts, many of the participants stated that the issues have inhibited their performances in the present. It does not seem contentious to say that subordinated individuals like ex-offenders have to deal with a multitude of conditions, inside and out, that encumber their positions within society. In such
cases, there would seem an obvious need to identify these conditions and see how, or if, we can help in our work. What is at stake in the everyday, then, is finding ways to affirm and nurture agency where it is needed by the individuals we serve; the catch is figuring out where these agentive hot spots are and how we deal with them.

In structuring ways of intervention, I argue that a materialist rhetoric can help us carefully and successfully identify the nature of the intervention we take on. By utilizing a materialist rhetoric, as I will show later, community partners can gain an epistemic advantage to the perceived problem given the historical analysis and attention to discourse a materialist approach warrants. Moreover, with a materialist approach coupled with Paula Mathieu’s notion of a tactical orientation to service learning, projects based on affirming agency need to also be attuned to the moments where other opportunities for agency seem direr given the desires and will of the individuals we help. Put another way, community workers need to be ready to respond in-the-moment to the needs regarding various images of agency of the people and opportune, kairotic moments of intervention. As Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee illustrate in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, *kairos* is a technique that “draws attention to the mutability of rhetoric, to the ever-changing arguments that can be found in connection with a particular issue” (47). Rhetoric that utilizes *kairos* encourages “a ready stance, in which rhetors are not only attuned to the history of an issue [...] but are also aware of the more precise turns taken by arguments” (48). In privileging the importance of *kairos*, community workers respond to such needs for various locations of agency when they emerge in the moment, and can do so given the cues from the participants when issues are instantiated and come to exist materially.
My argument, in part, is guided by Paula Mathieu’s assertions in *Tactics of Hope*. As Mathieu contends, community outreach should not be guided by standards and postulations within universities and institutions because this strategic orientation to service learning is not attuned to what is going on within the communities in real time. As Mathieu says, academics need to “understand the spatial politics around them and call on the tactics available in a given time and place” (xii). In other words, what I am to show extends Mathieu’s push for a tactical orientation by going a step further with its application. As Mathieu suggests, we should utilize project-based methods for community work—tactics that “represent small, temporary, and insufficient interventions into some rhetorical sphere”—that should necessarily act with “clear objectives as defined by the project” (76). As one step further, I argue that community work should ultimately not be project-based, but person-based. That is, projects need to be tactical—structured around spatial and temporal constraints—which includes being open to the immediate, *kairotic* opportunities of nurturing individual agency that arise *within the projects themselves*, located by the individuals we help or what we view as community workers as necessary. I believe such an orientation is necessary when taking Cushman’s urges seriously. That is, if we define success based in how we affect the lives of individuals in the everyday, then we need to be attuned to focus on what is going on with the individuals every day so we can succeed and produce change, no matter how “small” that change may be.

Thus, I contend that project-based work should be open to tactical interventions that are rooted in demands we can see. As Mathieu claims, since projects are inherently unpredictable, we cannot count on them having a tangible outcome regarding their intended public purpose (50). Because of this, community workers and individual participants within the projects need to
understand that “the doing of the thing has to be enough pleasure or reward” (47). If Mathieu is accurate in her assessment of the scope of success within community work, then we need to make sure that the people who create these projects understand where the rewards for the individuals lie, and maneuver and alter their projects accordingly to see the spoils.

What I am arguing for is a tactical approach to service learning based in the materiality of discourse—the pressures of society we can understand, assess, and use to our advantage—that is open to swift changes to nurture the contextual locations of agency that emerge in the projects created. To illustrate the connection between discourse around ex-offenders, tactics, agency, and materialism, I will draw upon portions of the WwC workshop that yielded different outcomes regarding the images of agency that were pursued: one set of statements that located agency linguistically in the writing catered to business culture, another where agency was located in personal, recovery culture, and how rhetorical agency was achieved (more or less) in both. I will illustrate why the prompt I drafted was appropriate (even without the proper analysis I am arguing for) for such a group given discourse regarding ex-offenders in Richmond. Thus, “Tactics and Tactical Thinking” will describe tactics and the characteristics of the person-based approach I promote; “What Lies Beneath in Richmond, Virginia: Materialism and Working with Conviction” will describe WwC itself and its position in Richmond, as well as give an understanding of how a materialist rhetoric is essential in organizing and navigating community projects; “Agency and the Layers of Need” will discuss the scope and importance of affirming the agency of others and what this should entail, including a discussion of a person-based approach to community engagement; and “Working with Working with Conviction” will analyze the time I spent at WwC and the workshops that occurred, ultimately illustrating the necessity for
the person-based approach to service learning projects given the joint significance of agency, tactical thinking, and materialism.
Tactics and Tactical Thinking

Mathieu urges a departure from controlling, strategic approaches to community literacy in order for scholars and students to adopt a more savvy, tactical orientation—one based in response to the spatial and temporal constraints present in community work. Using the work of Michel de Certeau, Mathieu explains that strategies are “calculated actions that emanate from and depend upon ‘proper’ (as in propertied) spaces, like corporations, state agencies, and educational institutions, and relate to others via this proper space” (16). Universities, for example, are guided by strategies—academic calendars and rules of assessment, for instance—that create a “potentially colonizing logic” that privilege a commitment to long-term planning and objective calculations of success (16-17). Such guides, however, are hollow in locations outside of universities or institutions—or “the streets,” as Mathieu refers to them—because such locations are not structured to abide by systems of stability. Thinking otherwise incorrectly assumes that the locations of service learning work can be made strategic extensions of universities. As Mathieu puts it, academic institutions “do not have strategic control over the streets” (xiv).

As Mathieu suggests, a tactical orientation to service learning works to ensure that this form of control is not considered. As an alternative to strategies, Mathieu argues that embracing a tactical orientation to service learning work can foreground time and space constraints—incompatible schedules and issues of time, for instance—in a way that makes us able to assess
how we can get things done. One does not apply tactics to seek stability, but “clever uses of
time” to measure what can realistically be achieved (17). An awareness of time and space is
important to utilizing tactics in community work because, unlike strategies, tactics are
established in unofficial places outside of the university and thus are at the mercy of the streets
(32). In such territory, as Mathieu suggests, one should hope to create temporary, fleeting bursts
of difference, taking advantage of opportunities in time rather than establishing long-term plans
that are questionably possible to see through.

Mathieu further demonstrates the difference between strategic/tactical orientations to the
service learning field by contrasting a problem/project orientation. A strategic approach,
grounded in safe spaces and abiding agendas, “operates from a negative space in that it seeks to
solve a problem, ameliorate a deficit, or fix an injustice” (50). A problem-orientation would not
privilege small interventions within normal life to seek change on a small level, but would try to
tackle systemic issues in hopes of grand change. For instance, a writing workshop for
incarcerated individuals for therapeutic purposes would not fit in the framework of a problem-
orientation because it would only help (at best) a few people; the workshop would not focus on
fixing the problems within the prison system or advocate for a change in sentencing legislation.
Thus, unlike the way Cushman talks about success, a problem-orientation is forced to see success
only if wars are won. As Mathieu states, this kind of orientation “runs the risk of leaving
participants overwhelmed, cynical, and feeling weak” (50). Unlike a problem orientation, a
tactical, project-based one “represent[s] small, temporary, and insufficient interventions into
some rhetorical sphere” (76). Projects are made to respond to problems, but are not meant to
alleviate them. Rather, projects themselves determine their own length, ability, and measures of
success (50). The point with projects is not to take on problems directly to fix them, but to cause some sort of spark that will hopefully, but not necessarily, alter reality in some small way. As Mathieu eloquently puts it, projects are “vehicles for invoking a better future” (19).

The fruits of tactical labor come by way of direct benefits. To demonstrate the potential of projects, Mathieu uses the wonderful example of a theatrical bus tour in Chicago called “Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour” that aimed to raise awareness of homelessness in the city. The tour was guided by homeless writers who helped navigate the city to stop at various sites to perform a scene based on a story from a writer’s life, and the charge to the public was twenty-five dollars. The importance of the bus tour, Mathieu writes, is fourfold:

1. It was a concrete way to link the writers’ stories with Chicago’s city space in a format that would allow a powerful face-to-face interaction with a live audience […]  
2. It could provide the writers with a public platform for raising political and social issues that affected their lives yet were beyond their individual control […]  
3. We planned to pay the writers/actors for their rehearsal and performance time […]  
4. It would require the writers to hone a wide range of skills. (40)

The bus tour was tactical because it engaged a live audience in a variety of performances at many locations to attempt to upset conventional expectations of homelessness; it was not meant to fix the homelessness problem in Chicago. The victories that came with the bus tour were within itself: “Unable to directly change the city spaces denied to the poor, the cast literally co-opted the city for two hours a night and turned it into an impromptu performance space” (45). Though fleeting, the players used the short time they had to produce benefits they could see: some money in their pockets, fun, clever public performances, and an excited and engaged audience listening and watching a real problem get addressed.
What I find most compelling about the tactical orientation to service learning work is its acceptance of its insufficiency: its inability to achieve grand change. As Mathieu urges, “Tactical power is real, but it is unreliable, constrained, and its effects are often unclear” (54). With a tactical, project-based orientation, the importance of the work is not winning or losing, achieving the goals or not: it is the act of coming together and trying to create change. Thus, “[p]rojects, by their tactical orientation are limited, and as a result the claims for them must be limited as well” (xiv). Because projects are necessarily short interventions based in the real world where uncontrollable factors are relevant and abundant, they may have clear exigencies, but the goals of projects may come to be sacrificed. Nevertheless, it is the doing of the thing itself that reaps its own reward.

If we take Mathieu’s suggestions seriously, that a project should have clear purposes but let go of specific goals, then it seems to me that we are looking for more than a project-based approach to service learning work. This is not to say that Mathieu is off with her argument that strategies and problem-based approaches are problematic and that tactical, project-based approaches should be embraced—she is dead on. However, if we are willing to say that the goals of projects need to be scrapped at times, then rewards do not come from what the projects give individuals, but what the individuals take from the projects. Certainly, projects have merit in themselves. Projects are called into action out of an immediate problem and are quick responses to that problem, hopefully leading to wins on a smaller scale: a cheap street newspaper written and distributed to inform an audience and gain a little bit of income, for instance. Nevertheless, if what we can rest on, no matter what, in a tactical orientation is that the people we serve get something out of the projects for themselves, and we are saying that the goals of the
projects should not be focal, then we are not advocating for a *project-based* approach to service learning as much as we are advocating for a *person-based* approach.

A person-based approach, the way I envision it, is an extension of the tactical, project-based approach Mathieu suggests. It is project-based in nature because it focuses on tiny mends rather than big fixes to large problems. By focusing on the people we serve and their immediate needs, we cannot establish ways to solve problems themselves, but ways to help individuals navigate through them. Thus, a person-based approach, like a project-based one, includes a clear exigency. Moreover, as Cushman supports, both privilege success by looking at immediate, everyday outcomes. Thus, what matters in both of these approaches are the changes in everyday life that are not world changing, but are life-changing on a smaller level.

The important distinction between a project-based and person-based approach is how they use tactics. The material constraints that Mathieu is sensitive to are certainly things that matter and are certainly helpful when designing community projects; these conditions are what prompt clever uses of time. With clever interventions rather than concrete ones, Mathieu says that a project’s success is grounded “not in scientific proof but in rhetorical—and thus changeable—ideas and arguments” (17). Rhetorical ideas and arguments are necessary within the streets because they make up a conflicted and complex space; we cannot count on anything being static in the streets. In order to get things accomplished, groups must be attuned to the world around them and those they work with to structure and restructure projects of intervention—a system of trial-and-error. Yet, focusing on retooling methods of intervention because of the outcome of specific projects seems to possibly overlook potential moments within the projects themselves that can be changed while they are occurring to better suit the people we
serve. In other words, projects should be open to tactical changes themselves. Since we are committed to considering the temporal and spatial constraints involving our work, it may be presumptuous to assume that the people we serve are able to take part in this trial-and-error process. Thus, given that the ultimate goals for projects are the direct benefits individuals receive from the work itself, and we have to be sensitive to the conditions that bring everyone together, we should not look at projects as impervious to the tactical maneuvers they promote.

By understanding projects as open to tactical changes within themselves, we can better guarantee that the individuals we serve actually see benefits. As I have stated, a person-based approach begins just as a project-based one does, but is open to change given what seems better to pursue for people in the process. As de Certeau says, “Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time—to the circumstances which the precise instant of the intervention transforms into a favorable situation” (38). When applied to the project itself, we take into account that though the project may be understood as the right place to begin, being aware of the timely, kairotic moments that rise up within projects that seem worth pursuing is advantageous when helping others in short amounts of time. Since we can abandon the goals of projects, it seems fair to let go of the projects themselves once something comes along that is more worthwhile for the people within them. Ultimately, if we are to remain sensitive to time and space constraints, then we need to understand that we need to use time to the people’s advantage, and not necessarily the project’s goals.

The concern that lingers with the person-based approach I promote is a question of boundaries: How do we know what is inappropriate to pursue given the needs of the individuals we serve, their desires, and our abilities as facilitators? Do we take moments to pursue tactical,
*kairotic* turns in the project for *anything*? These questions go beyond the potential insufficiency in the work itself; as Mathieu suggests, failure should not be an issue. However, a person-based orientation should not be confused with a no-holds-barred, anything goes orientation. In a sense, this is easy to understand. For instance, the WwC writing workshops would never have become drum circles, even if the participants wanted to experience some therapeutic release from banging on a bass drum; I do not know how to lead a drum circle or play drums, and the WwC does not have the resources to facilitate such a project. But it is more than abilities and resources. Boundaries come from the purpose of the project. Though the project’s goals may be abandoned, its exigency certainly is not. Every individual within a project comes together for a reason, and though the particular product may change, the intentions behind any tactical move to change do not. One is still aligned with the purpose of the work: in the case of WwC, it was helping ex-offenders reenter society.

What is at issue, in part, seems to be a matter of crossing lines with everyone involved in any service learning project. That is, everyone involved—teachers, students, organizations, the people we serve, etc.—need be open and excited about every move made. Thus, a lot of weight is on the facilitator to understand the *kairotic* moments that are worth pursuing: acting as a mediator between every person involved in order to push the work in a new direction. This is not to say that the *goals* of institutions or teachers should be seen as equal to the *needs* of the people that we serve. In operating under a person-based stance, everyone involved agrees to abandon goals when necessary. Nevertheless, there are still inherent standards outside of agendas that are important to consider. The facilitator of a writing workshop for prisoners created to write personal narratives for rehabilitative purposes would not, it would seem, be open
to changing the trajectory of the workshop to write flashy gang dramas. Such fiction is not aligned with the purpose of the workshop, and would thus be considered out of bounds. Thus, though goals of projects are open for abandonment, the broader purposes of projects remain intact. What matters is how we can understand the scope of such purposes to utilize tactical, kairotic moments for the benefit of the people we serve.

Focusing on these purposes and adopting a person-based approach to service learning work, if worked in properly, can help institutions and universities keep the focus of their community work on helping the people they serve rather than forwarding their own work for their own work’s sake. As Mathieu argues, the field of service learning should be expanded to include projects that “utilize academic expertise not to further the immediate professional ends of the scholar but to meet the immediate needs […] in local communities” (117). As I have discussed it, a person-based approach shares this sentiment of helping in immediate need. However, the difference between persons and projects when accepted by strategic entities is that a person-based orientation always keeps the people we serve in the forefront: utilizing academic expertise to structure ways of intervening while always being aware of the needs of the people in real time. What follows is an illustration of a program for criminal offenders that adopts the sort of person-based approach I am advocating for.

**A Look at Changing Lives Through Literature**

In *Finding a Voice: The Practice of Changing Lives Through Literature*, Jean Trounstine and Robert Waxler discuss the efficacy of an alternate sentencing program called *Changing Lives Through Literature* (CLTL) and its vision that through discussions of literature, criminal
offenders could find their voices in the world and change their lives “to make connections with the characters or ideas in a text and to rethink our own behavior” (5). The program began with a partnership between Waxler, Judge Robert Kane, a Massachusetts District Court Justice, Wayne St. Pierre, a New Bedford District Court probation officer, and eight men sentenced to probation instead of prison under the stipulation that they had to complete a Modern American literature seminar with Waxler. Through the twelve-week program of discussing novels, the authors say that “the men began to explore aspects of themselves, to listen to their peers, to increase their ability to communicate ideas and feelings to men of authority who they thought would never listen to them and to engage in dialogue in a classroom setting where all ideas were valid” (2). The authors acknowledge the success of the formative CLTL program by documenting the outcomes of three students, two of which stating that the program helped them end their drug addictions and become college students, and the third stating that the program helped him return to school to achieve his high school diploma (2-3). Since the initial program, CLTL has earned international press and the program has stretched to states such as Texas, Arizona, New York, Main, Rhode Island, and Connecticut (4). The authors sum up the general success of the program and its inception outside of Massachusetts by stating the following: “Literature was empowering. Discussion enhanced that power. The process of reading led to reflection. Reflection led to change” (6).

What is important to take away from CLTL is that though the goal of empowering individuals within their groups is the same, the structure for each program varies given the participants and their facilitators. With CLTL, the goal of helping criminal offenders rehabilitate themselves is key, not the methods of how this is ascertained. Trounstine and Waxler site many
ways of organizing the programs based on what has been successful before: small group conversations (216), student writing (226), poetry (231), and writing rap songs (232), to name a few. In understanding that there are many ways to get at this goal, CLTL listens to the desires of the students rather than focusing on the created curriculum. As they state, “Every CLTL program is different, but all have this in common: literature, discussion, and a plurality of voices. The literature may be a stepping-off place, or it may be the meat and potatoes of the class” (6). CLTL programs use literature because they have seen it work before, but they are not married to their practices. Though a good starting off point, “the initial approach, then, must be flexible and subject to easy change” (139).

Coupled with the many incarnations of CLTL that have been successful, Trounstine and Waxler’s suggestions about structuring CLTL programs demonstrates that what is not important are the methods themselves with helping criminal offenders. Texts may be selected initially because they have worked in the past or because they seem like good books for certain groups, but the facilitator’s reading of the situation could be off when applied to every group. If *To Kill a Mockingbird* is read with little enjoyment in a particular group and, for some reason, *The Outsiders* would seem to work better, it seems clear that the right move is to swap novels. Trounstine and Waxler would agree. The point is not what seeing a certain book works for offenders, but finding out which book or short story or poem will works for the specific individuals within the group. As one of the facilitators of CLTL says,

> Success in CLTL is [...] about recognizing our vulnerabilities and doing what we can to heal our own and one another’s words. These may not be moments of salvation, certainly not moments of permanent conversation, but they allow us to transcend our isolated egos, and act instead through the community we help to create, briefly and tentatively, as we talk together in the classroom. (35)
Of course, the boundaries of CLTL include sticking to literature to a degree as given the parameters demonstrated to the courts, and thus the practices of the program are not completely malleable. However, what remains true despite the boundaries is that success in CLTL does not come from proving a certain method brings about a certain change; success comes from listening to the individuals served to find ways that change can occur.

As I have argued here, privileging the goals of service learning programs and projects risks overlooking the immediate needs of the persons we wish to serve. Taking cues from Paulo Freire, Cushman urges that “in doing our scholarly work, we should take social responsibility for the people from and with whom we come to understand a topic” (“Rhetorician” 239). With this responsibility come commitments. As Cushman warns us, privileging theories and goals for the sake of posterity runs the risk of “exclud[ing] many of the people we’re trying to empower for the sake of positing […] liberating ideas” (“Rhetorician” 250). Cushman uses “liberating ideas” here to mean the theories thought of outside of the communities and inside distant places such as universities. What Cushman rightly stresses here is that scholars should not posit theories of community outreach first and get caught up in proving their salience. Instead, scholars should look to see what already seems salient and then structure theories based in what is empirically found. Though this warning is based in a comparison of the potentially detrimental “top-down” approach to service learning program/project formation, “bottom-up” approaches need to be cautious of this as well. Tactics are inherently bottom-up maneuvers; they are based in what can be done quickly for direct benefits. Tactics are also inherently insufficient. Projects based in timely interventions risk failure if only because they are developed under pressure. A person-
based focus takes some of the edge off with this insufficiency because we do not look to what the projects purport, but what the people want.

Nevertheless, though work should ultimately be person-based—abandoning plans and goals for the benefit of the people we serve—ways of intervention need places to begin. When listing areas of concern when creating projects, Mathieu asks, “How much time are we willing to invest to learn about local issues and local spaces?” (21). I believe a lot. Deeply educating ourselves in the issues we concern ourselves with helps guarantee that we are doing the best we can to interpret a problem and intervening appropriately. This is why embracing a materialist rhetoric is essential, because it gives us a concrete place to begin our work. By utilizing a materialist rhetoric to begin our work and constantly looking to the people we serve for points of reframing, we can ensure that we are not overlooking areas of need that stare us in the face.
What Lies Beneath in Richmond, Virginia: Materialism and Working with Conviction

As stated by the program, WwC’s mission is to “find creative ways to mentor convicted felons who are highly motivated, dedicated to self-improvement, and capable of securing employment” (Probation and Parole) (See Appendix A). Ultimately, the goal of WwC is to help ex-offenders gain employment, aiding in a decrease in recidivism and an increase in public safety in Richmond, VA. The group is populated with individuals—men and women, mostly middle-aged (with the exception of one nineteen year-old)—who are approved by their parole officers and considered as dedicated to reentering society. Yet, WwC is more than merely an input and output of employment aid. Using Nancy Fraser’s termininology, WwC is what Lorraine Higgins and Lisa Brush would call a “counterhegemonic public.” As they assert in “Personal Experience Narratives: Writing the Wrongs of Welfare,” this type of public is a “rhetorical (and often literal) ‘safe space’ for building and expressing identities, analyses, solidarity, leadership skills, and other basic social movement capacities” (695). WwC provides such a space; ex-offenders can engage with one another and discuss their trials and frustrations imposed on them by themselves and society, communicate with motivational speakers who have been through the prison system and have successfully reintegrated, and participate in practical activities that aid in successful reintegration (balancing checkbooks, sticking to a budget, etc.). Moreover, it is a “counter” public as Michael Warner says, because it is inhabited by individuals who understand their subordinated statuses (121-122). By providing a literal space for discourse
involving the procedures and problems of gaining employment and reintegrating in dominant society, WwC has created a local public, or a “symbolic construct enacted in time and space around shared exigencies,” for social action (Long *Community* 15).

Such a safe haven space is essential for ex-offenders given the harmful discourse that binds them. As Warner says, any public, whether a dominant or subordinated one, engages in struggles when articulating and addressing the multitude of conditions that bring its individuals together (12). Hence, before marginal individuals can do any work with making themselves understood, they must first identity how they, and other similar individuals, are seen in eyes of larger public spheres so they can come together and reframe the lenses. Of course, for certain marginalized groups, this reframing is difficult. As John Sloop suggests in *The Cultural Prison*, we attribute negative characterizations to certain groups because of the way public discourse shapes our views of them. Sloop gives the example of the prisoner, stating that “the representation of the prisoner, like all characterizations and arguments, does not smoothly begin and end and is not easily forgotten once adopted by cultural participants. Rather, once created, discursive characterizations and objects exist as material” (Sloop 63-64). The instantiation and public acceptance of such characterizations is crucial when considering how individuals within society view the characterizations’ subjects. As Sloop’s argument suggests, as soon as “prisoner” is uttered, a certain person is painted for the listener: whether it is the crooked, incorrigible criminal or the dismayed victim that clinks his cup back and forth on bars. The audience can predict the script before it is even read.
These same discursive characterizations operate for words like “felon,” or “ex-offender,” and the stigma behind them carries a barrel of burden for its subjects.\(^1\) During my work with WwC, the group members voiced many times how their subordinate statuses within Richmond have affected their lives socially and emotionally. As Terrance, one of the program’s participants, said in one of our conversations, “When people know who I am, they don’t see me. They see a felon” (Terrence). Regardless of how much the “people” Terrance refers to (in the context he meant potential employers, friends, and his ex-girlfriend) sell him short in reducing him to his conviction, they nevertheless “know” enough about him to judge him. Bogged down by such understandings and the molding power of discourse, subordinated individuals’ voices are drowned out by dominant ones.

Conversations involving how social stigmas around ex-offenders affected the participants’ lives came fairly frequently during my time at WwC. Given that the program focuses on assisting ex-offenders to successfully gain employment, stories of rejection from potential employers were common. The most active job searcher in the group, Janice, shared many of these stories over the months we talked: stories that included companies telling her they couldn’t hire felons, employers granting her second interviews then rejecting her after the conviction surfaced, even promising her employment after proper paperwork had been filled then never calling her back. As she told me once, “Even when you get your foot in the door, when that conviction comes up, it’s like they don’t want to talk to you” (Janice).

---

\(^1\) I do not assume that all ex-offenders are unable to assert themselves as agents publicly—celebrities who have been convicted of felonies, for instance, do it all the time. For convenience, however, “ex-offender” here assumes an individual with such a conflict.
The conversations between the group and a guest speaker from the Department of Juvenile Justice promoted the idea of the writing workshop. The parameters were set by WwC: to do some writing that responds to the problem—or at least helps fix the participants’ problems—of gaining employment and successfully reintegrating into society. As Loraine Higgins, Lisa Brush, and Linda Flower assert in “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry,” writing about community problems “begins, as all writing does, with an analysis of the rhetorical situation—identifying the nature of the exigency that prompts response and the potential audiences that might be addressed” (170). Interestingly enough, I did not help identify the problem addressed by WwC—I was a tool to help ameliorate it. Hence, I did not do the proper rhetorical analysis to structure the project as I argue for below, because the work was already done when I got there; the project came from the program itself after the suggestions from the guest speaker and the stated needs from the participants. As such, walking in on the project as it was formed ostensibly satisfies what the rhetorical analysis I present concludes. However, as I contend, knowing the assumptions within the communities where our service learning projects exist can help identify the nature of intervention that is needed to structure projects for social change.

The heart of the matter here is that embracing a materialist rhetoric in service learning can not only bring about a properly marked starting line for community projects, but, as I argue later, can help community workers locate and explicate important signs of need from the individuals we serve as they become material within the projects themselves. Hence, I do not intend to defend materialism here in any way outside of its valuable connection to activism in service learning: getting everything we can out of the projects we forge from good research of
the past and open eyes and ears in the present. For now, I will provide an understanding of a materialist rhetoric and show how it can be used in an analysis of reentry in Richmond, Virginia to establish the framework of reintegration projects within the city. I will then show later how a materialist approach weds with the tactical orientation I propose through the connection between materialism and the types of kariotic moments of intervention I discuss.

Some Talk about History and Reality

In his influential “A Materialist’s Conception of Rhetoric,” Michael McGee urges that a materialist understanding of rhetoric can make needed sense of the relationship between theory and practice. Unlike the common understanding of rhetoric as an “art” where guidelines for persuasion are imagined and then tested, McGee argues that a material theory of rhetoric starts from real examples of successful—or failed—texts and makes rules for the “description, explanation, perhaps even prediction of the formation of consciousness itself” (18-19). As McGee seems to suggest, understanding rhetoric as art here puts the cart before the horse: it confuses speech as “a product instead of a function” (“A Materialist’s” 21). A public speech is not something imagined in theory and then styled to fit the world around us. Rather, it is something formulated in practice, created by observations of the function of communication with society with the intent to produce change within society (“A Materialist’s” 22).

Rhetoric, then, is not based in theoretical considerations, but in solid, empirical practice. According to McGee, it is materialist in that it is “a natural social phenomenon in the context of which symbolic claims are made on the behavior and/or belief of one or more person, allegedly in the interest of such individuals, and with the strong presumption that such claims will cause
meaningful change” (“A Materialist’s” 31). By understanding the commitments “natural” within society, one can attempt to control discourse and create progress. As Ronald Greene says, a materialist rhetoric “posit[s] materiality as an immanent process of production in which rhetoric and communication are integral elements of any mode of production” (49). Hence, in being central to enabling change we can see within society, rhetoric is drawn as a form of power and control.

Because materialist rhetoric is only concerned with what can be measured and seen in reality, paying attention to the materiality of discourse can help tailor projects for the specific needs of the subordinated individuals when faced with trying to gain a voice in dominant public spheres. As Mathieu urges about a tactical approach to service learning inquiries, “Projects are locally defined and action oriented” (xix). Going along with Mathieu, embracing a materialist rhetoric keeps projects “locally defined” because it hinges on an historical analysis that is necessarily local; since projects are swift interventions in the communities we serve, a materialist rhetoric entails an analysis of what is at stake locally. Embracing a materialist approach forces community partners to keep their ears to the ground within the areas they serve to hear when and where change can occur. David Coogan makes this point in his “Service Learning for Social Change,” writing about a service learning project he directed in 2002 to increase parent involvement in seven public schools in the South Side of Chicago, assessing the project’s minimal success, and arguing that a materialist rhetoric could have helped produce an historical understanding of the issue that was essential for success. In utilizing a materialist rhetoric, Coogan posits that rhetoricians can “discover the arguments that already exist in the communities we wish to serve; analyze the effectiveness of those arguments; collaboratively
produce viable alternatives with community partners; and assess the impact of our interventions” (211). With this schema of service learning, doing one’s homework is essential; a materialist rhetoric calls for us to look at the history of any issue—to dig deep and pull the roots—before we make our moves in the present. With our historical understandings, we can structure projects of intervention from the ground up.

Furthermore, though a materialist perspective requires one to research a problem before acting—a sort of waiting before jumping in the pool and risking a cramp—it helps projects be “action oriented” because it requires community workers to respond to what is tangible: what can be changed. As McGee suggests, the rhetorical work should be “real and material, rather than scriptural, textual, or ideal. Whatever ideas are developed should be reifications of or abstractions from what we experience empirically in our world” (*Rhetoric* 139). By looking out onto the earth rather than into the ether and paying attention to the things we can immediately see, whether they have existed for ages or become immediately instantiated, we can understand where actual battles lie and fight, rather than sit back ponder where they could be.

To be “instantiated” means to have a real instance in the world. Or, as McGee puts it, an instantiation is “any concrete manifestation of an abstraction”: illustrating this point by giving an example of “chair” being an instantiation of the abstraction “furniture” (*Rhetoric* 146). McGee’s point is that a materialist does not concern himself with ideas or abstractions that cannot be instantiated; if they cannot be instantiated, then they are not real (*Rhetoric* 144). Thus, a materialist rhetoric weds well with a tactical orientation of service learning because it is necessarily aware of the conditions that are of concern, including the spatial and temporal conditions that exist which tactics make their business.
As suggested, a materialist analysis gives us an epistemic upper hand when striving for social change. In embracing such analysis, we can know—or can at least have a really good idea of—exactly what we’re up against. In this light, we can look at Janice and Terrance’s comments and, in conjunction with a materialist framework, come to understand that such public assumptions about ex-offenders are influenced by cohering ideologies that exist materially in general public arguments. Put another way, such assumptions are fueled by ideographs. As McGee asserts, an ideograph is an “ordinary-language term found in political discourse” that represents a “collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal (“The ‘Ideograph’” 435). They are not actual propositions, but phrases that represent propositions commonly understood. McGee gives the example of terms such as “property,” “liberty,” and “freedom of speech” to demonstrate that we understand these terms to have meaning, or “intrinsic force,” even when they are uttered outside of arguments or formal claims (“The ‘Ideograph’” 428). For instance, my interlocutor can certainly understand what I mean when I say, “Burning one’s draft card does not fall under the freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution” because it is a claim that can be tested for truth or falsity. Nevertheless, “freedom of speech” can be understood outside of being situated within a proposition. As McGee states, such words are the “basic structural elements, the building blocks, of ideology. They may be thought of as ‘ideographs,’ for, like Chinese symbols, they signify and ‘contain’ a unique ideological commitment […] that each member of a community will see as a gestalt every complex nuance in them” (“The Ideograph” 428).

Though not propositions themselves, ideographs such as “freedom of speech” encapsulate ideas and arguments that would be, and are, called upon to justify and support
collective commitments within society. As Coogan discusses, ideographs are “not full arguments […] but ideological icebergs” that “take the ideological pulse of the community” (“Service Learning” 213) and “coat the surface of ideological and material conditions, enabling elaborate justifications of ‘reality’” (“Moving Students” 152). Thus, in going along with McGee and Coogan, we should be able to discuss the ideological framework (and our commitments to it within society) that surrounds ex-offenders reentering communities by analyzing the relevant ideographs at play. As McGee argues, “A complete description of an ideology […] will consist of (1) the isolation of a society’s ideographs, (2) the exposure and analysis of the diachronic structure of every ideograph, and (3) characterization of synchronic relationship among all the ideographs in a particular context” (“The ‘Ideograph’” 436). Going along with McGee, considering the ideological climate surrounding ex-offenders in Richmond includes identifying the relevant ideographs, how they have formed over time, and how they relate to one another within society in the present.

For the purposes of this discussion, I provide a similar analysis made by Coogan in his “Moving Students into Social Movements” that shows how “the system” functions as an ideograph that constrains ex-offenders in Richmond from successfully reintegrating (152). As Coogan suggests for doing ideographic analyses, we need to utilize everyday texts in our communities—newsletters, newspapers, council meetings, etc.—and use them to “identify the key organizations, individuals, and arguments” (“Service Learning” 229). By looking at various texts that involve the current state of reintegration on a local level and examining the nature of “the system” as an ideograph, we can become better equipped to establish service learning
projects that help subvert these understood assumptions about ex-offenders at play and adequately aid in the reentry movement.

“The System” and Reentry in Richmond, Virginia

Any discussion of ex-offenders and reentry necessarily presupposes an infraction against society—a felony. However, such discussion does not necessarily presuppose that a felon has a place back in society. Thus, “the system” encompasses an understanding of the laws and rules we as productive members of society have agreed to uphold and abide by and includes our obligations as members of a society to respect such prescriptions. In violating such rules, the felon acts in opposition to the common good and becomes an enemy to society. As political scientist Alec Ewald illustrates in his “Civil Death,” felon disenfranchisement supporters believe that being a part of society is “understood not merely as conferring the right to govern oneself, but a right to share in the governing of others […] Felons have rejected the right of others to govern them” (1077). Thus, because of his transgression and lack of respect for society, this suggests that a felon is necessarily an outsider to society, and is thus indebted to society.

In understanding that citizens must follow the rules of a society, they must also attempt to create suitable punishments that will help protect society. “The system,” then, does not merely include the ways in which citizens should act justly; it also includes how just citizens should punish transgressors. In a response to a surge of violent crimes, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was passed in 1994. The Crime Act included many areas of federal law expansion, such as establishing the Federal Assault Weapons Ban and creating dozens of new death penalty offenses (“Violent Crime”). Connected to this Act were various newly adopted
sentencing guidelines. In Virginia, strategies for reducing violent crime fueled Virginia’s 1993 gubernatorial race; republican candidate George Allen made the elimination of parole and the call for stricter punishment for violent offenders the focus of his campaign (Ostrom 4). After winning the election, Allen established the Sentencing and Parole Abolition Commission which suggested an overhaul of the sentencing system and a focus on a “truth-in-sentencing” program (Ostrom 4). This program was established on January 1, 1995 as an effort to ensure that time ex-offenders would serve in prison rigidly aligned with the sentences they received, and to “get tough” on crime by ensuring incarceration of offenders (Research on 18). As a result, parole was abolished, good time allowances were significantly reduced, and prison terms for offenders were increased substantially; with the truth-in-sentencing legislation, offenders were ensured to serve at least 85% of their sentence (Alternatives 8).

By responding to the ostensibly large increase of violent crime with enforcing stricter laws, lawmakers reinforced the strength of “the system” in virtue of creating a harsher, systematic form of societal protection. By having felons locked up for longer and with less chance of getting out earlier, more criminals are kept off of the streets, and therefore, the streets are safer. Moreover, the laws ensure that law-abiding members of society get what they want through punishment. As current Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell wrote in his address to ex-offenders to have their rights restored, “As the father of five and a former prosecutor, I believe that the commission of a crime must have a tough and just consequence” (McDonnell). McDonnell urges to the ex-offender reading that as a figure of the government and a member of society (and a father), he stands by the justice system and holds ex-offenders to blame for their transgressions. He goes on to urge that “once an offender has paid his debt to society, he
deserves a second chance” (McDonnell). The deficit McDonnell addresses is causal with crime: one has a responsibility to society to uphold and abide by its laws, and if one doesn’t, they must make it up to society.

Though as citizens we have to play by the rules, augmenting punitive measures ubiquitously leaves less room for the varying differences of being convicted felons and reinforces stigma behind them returning to society. In thinking of ex-offenders strictly in relation to “the system,” we only think of people as either productive members of society, or criminals who are indebted to it. But the issue is more nuanced than situating people as criminals or productive citizens—the degree of offenses must play a role. Granted, truth-in-sentencing legislation did not conflate the degree of crime between the murderer and the thief, but it did significantly increase punishment durations for both violent and (if a repeat offender) non-violent felons. Under the truth-in-sentencing legislation, offenders serve sentences two to six times longer than before (Ostrom 2). Establishing tougher sentences for offenders focuses on the law being rigid and right rather than overly strict and severe; it does not adequately assess the genesis of the criminal act itself or the conditions that surround keeping felons in jail for longer durations.

Given the severity of sentencing, the reentry movement currently asks society to help fix “the system” that weighs ex-offenders down. For instance, the City of Richmond has recently faced challenges to consider conditions that surround criminals outside of the social norms and standards of the law, especially given recent data stating that Richmond has the highest incarceration rate per capita and the devastatingly poor conditions of the Richmond City Jail (Williams). In response to the staggering number of inmates in the Richmond City Jail—1400—
compared to its supposed maximum capacity—882—Richmond’s Sheriff C.T. Woody states, “The jail is full of people who should be elsewhere,” and suggests that at least a quarter of the jail’s population is mentally ill, drug or alcohol addicted, homeless, or too poor to afford bail (qtd. in Williams). Woody demonstrates in his testimony that, because these individuals are incarcerated (and thus we can assume they are justly so), they have chosen to live outside of “the system”. Nevertheless, acknowledging that twenty-five percent of the individuals incarcerated have circumstances outside of their convictions and should not be in prison indicates that there are mitigating factors overlooked that government officials are now taking into account when judging offenders, and such factors should be utilized when assessing the individuals who commit crimes.

At the heart of the matter, such a fix in “the system” works as a timely consideration to the severity that came from establishing strict laws, not merely emergent from the focus on crowded and cruel prisons. The push seems for “the system” to be retooled as a way of systematically advocating for alternatives to harsh, unfair punishments. Thus, a sense of moral accountability, one seemingly judged by normative standards outside of law, has come in conversation with assessing “the system” by looking at violent and non-violent offenders: almost indicating the savable from the morally corrupt. In an article in The Economist that addresses the “love affair with lock and key” in America, the author asserts that “when a habitual rapist is locked up, the streets are safer […] but the same is not necessarily true of petty drug-dealers” (26). By addressing the degrees of criminality, the article urges that the degree of danger within society is what should put people in cells.

The same juxtaposition is made in the Richmond Times-Dispatch article, “Crime: Soft or
“Crime?: Soft of Smart?” but develops the concern to include social dynamics that shape criminals. By addressing Richmond Commonwealth’s Attorney Michael Herring’s plan to offer drug dealers alternatives to jail—such as time in rehab—if their records are clean, the article urges that social conditions should be taken into account for blame. These conditions include coming from “poverty-slammed urban areas” where “drug dealing is almost a form of entrepreneurship” (“Crime”). The article suggests that though we cannot help but hold the murderer liable for his crime, we can understand that other, non-violent crimes are hard to dodge for various reasons. Hence, in providing ways of understanding criminals outside of the crimes themselves, it is suggested that “the system” can be refigured by a deepened understanding of the connection between crime and punishment; in short, the degree and reason for retribution should be reconsidered.

Of course, not everyone wants to reconsider things. Like many other similar articles on the Richmond Times-Dispatch website, the author’s assertion in “Crime: Soft of Smart?” regarded the difference between the non-violent (particularly drug offenses) and the violent criminal spawned opposition. As one person wrote, “All of these offense do violence to the community and weaken the social fabric of Richmond, most especially drug dealing because it spawns a whole culture of criminality, including burglary, street robbery and other property crimes to obtain money to purchase the drugs and violent crime to control the market” (“Crime”). The person reaffirms the need for strength of “the system” and the punishment that comes along with criminality by asserting his/her resistance to the notion of reentry. Felons plague society, not merely certain kinds of felons. Because felons fail at being lawful members of society, it seems to follow from this writer’s words that felons should not be allowed back in
society; it is not safe for Richmond to do so.

In understanding how “the system” influences the commitments of the general public, we see that a project such as the WwC workshop needs to facilitate writing that addresses how the participants have satisfied their obligations, or debt, to “the system”: admitting to their transgression and what they have done to make it up to society, while understanding that there is a growing awareness—if only just a dim beam of light—within society that “the system” has its problems. As discussed earlier, the connection between discourse and materialism shows how once an idea is considered true by society, the idea becomes residual and persistent (McGee “A Materialist’s” 32). Efficiently understanding this connection opens up avenues of response through an interpretation of the past. As Crowley and Hawhee discuss, rhetors who utilize kairotic opportunities for change and are deeply familiar with the history of an issue are “well equipped to find convincing arguments in any given situation” (48). With a materialist rhetoric, discourse is understood as real and residual in that we can always understand its place in society through time. Through this historical understanding, we can cue discursive power to shape and change reality in the present.

In efficiently understanding the solidity of “the system” and creating projects to respond, projects will ultimately privilege and support the rhetorical agency that Linda Flower urges to participate in public deliberation and engagement: interpreting and responding to competing voices in one’s community (207). As stated earlier, Flower urges the importance of taking rhetorical agency—taking initiative as a writer to create a negotiated, dialogic understanding of a shared problem and go public with that understanding. The agency Flower describes as focal is a performative powerhouse: a mix between individual and collaborative investigations that oppose
the voices of one’s community both internally and publically. Thus, understanding the
materiality of discourse—the actual, immediate forces that are at play—helps us know where to
begin our projects to bring about this agency. From here, we can ride them out and see where they go.

I will pause in my discussion of materialism here to demonstrate the importance of locating and cultivating agency within service learning projects, especially regarding ex-offenders. I have already begun gleaning the need for agency by showing how discursive characterizations of “ex-offender” can well up within communities and prohibit ex-offenders from successfully reintegrating within society—a task that requires active participation. From here, I will further explore notions of agency using Flower’s idea of rhetorical agency and what she deems are its cognates. This discussion will help set the groundwork to show that what is at stake is not necessarily focusing projects to affirm any one specific form of agency, but that are populated with people who can identify the various sites of various forms of agency within community projects, assess which sites are worth pursuing, and ultimately, change the projects accordingly in real time.
Agency and the Layers of Need

In her discussion of images of empowerment, Flower stresses that “the central thing one is empowered to do in community literacy is to take rhetorical agency” (139). In her work at the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh, a community/university collaboration dedicated to helping teens and adults produce writing to bring awareness to the problems and goals of their neighborhoods, she states that taking rhetorical agency meant to “take[e] initiative as a writer to create a negotiated, dialogic understanding of a shared problem” and to “go public with that understanding in live dialogue with an expanding set of communities” (139). “Going public” here means to “engage in a dialogue that listens, speaks, and expects a response to which they are prepared to respond” (205). Thus, given Flower’s two-prong representation of agency, not every public action counts as taking agency: “action without the perception of control doesn’t seem to count” (193). For instance, emotional paroxysms do not pass muster. Because agency is not completely open to interpretation, Flower urges that the onus is on the community worker to acknowledge the indicators of agency within the individuals we help—to affirm a contested agency (201).

In arguing that community literacy is the work of rhetorical agents, Flower urges that sites of agency need to be set to see individual, everyday instances; these sites will remain under our radar if we understand agency merely as acts of persuasive public advocacy or “warranted public assent” (214). She illustrates this point in her discussion of Raymond Musgrove, one of
the students at the CLC, and how he demonstrated himself as a rhetorical agent despite public contention. After writing a piece about a young man’s drug problem and his ability to overcome it—a piece that included a playscript, a flashback, and a dialogue with the reader—Raymond joined other writers at the CLC showcasing their work to a public audience. Though Flower states that the members of the CLC were proud of Raymond for being confident, articulate, and initiating a dialogue with his neighborhood, she notes that Raymond’s English teacher who came for the reading was angry. As Flower indicates, “Raymond’s unedited text, with its mix of unintentional punctuation and dialogue, Black English Vernacular, and garden-variety errors of grammar and spelling was proof enough of her contention: we had puffed him up” (189).

Interestingly enough, however, Flower notes that another group of readers dismissed Raymond’s writing based on his lack of authenticity: it was not “black” enough (194). Thus, in either of these camps, Raymond wavers enough between the two vernaculars to demonstrate a lack of agency in both.

But Raymond’s critics here missed the point. Surely, if Raymond’s status as agent is determined by a demonstration of full control over an elite discourse or the sole use of an expressive, “authentic” vernacular, then he does not make the cut. However, it is this vulnerability of rejection that, according to Flower, marks Raymond’s public engagement with his writing as rhetorical. As she maintains, Raymond’s case is an example of the rhetorical agency that comes from negotiated meaning making “in part because he doesn’t fully succeed in overcoming all difficulties, controlling his medium, exhibiting unruffled will, or achieving uncompromised success” (209). What matters in Raymond’s case, as well as any rhetorical agent, is not the ability to write error-free or to write in any particular genuine dialect, but to
utilize ways to engage community members in dialogue to “open a door to inquiry and the delicate possibility of transformation” (215). Raymond’s status as an agent was not recognized by the CLC because of his ability to change the opinions within the audience, but because of the deliberate choices within his writing and his engagement with the audience to try to change opinions.

Flower’s theory of rhetorical agency and affirmation is heavily influenced by Cornel West’s theory of prophetic pragmatism—a theory based in foregrounding and affirming the “agency, capacity and ability of human beings who have been culturally degraded, politically oppressed and economically exploited” (Flower 111). In her reading of West in regards to affirming agency, Flower states:

The challenge to universities, then, is not to deny their own power, expertise, or agendas. Their technical tools, specialized discourse, and intellectual goals are needed. The challenge is to construct a mutual representation of the intentionality, the communal wisdom, and the evaluative competence of the community partners. The question is not whether such agency is there but whether institutional partners can organize themselves to uncover and acknowledge it. (111)

Such a use of power and ability from our positions in universities to help others is what Cushman illustrates as crucial for empowering others: to help people achieve goals by providing resources; to facilitate their actions; and to give out our power to help push along people’s achievements (“Rhetorician” 241). When applied to WwC, for instance, empowerment came through facilitating a physical space for the participants to come together as a public, providing ways of helping them achieve employment (the writing workshop, for instance), and using WwC as an arm of the Richmond Parole Office itself to demonstrate institutional, authoritative support of the participants. Broadly speaking, through our abilities to lend our statuses to others, we are able to
take on Flower’s call to empower others and assert themselves in both “individual action and communal connectedness” (203).

This discussion of the internal and external commitments to taking agency brings about several different interpretations of agency Flower considers, all of which she claims offer parallels to the rhetorical agency she promotes. What is important in her offering here is the acknowledgment that (1) important agentive spaces come in all a variety of forms (perhaps a trivially true claim) and, as it seems to me, (2) they can be connected to comprise a sense of rhetorical agency. In considering one interpretation, Flower states that scholars discussing questions of agency have shifted their attention away from the agent’s intention and ability of expression to an “embedded” action-oriented understanding: “that is, to the situated rhetorical performance itself […] [that] can not be separated from the necessary material conditions, such as, time place, people or topic, that allows a speaker to occupy what is called an agentive space” (202). Though she does not use this example, John Trimbur adopts such a performance-based model of agency in his “Agency and the Death of the Author: A Partial Defense of Modernism.” As he contends, discussions of agency that are theory-based rather than practice-based are misled; representations of agency are not as much theories but instead are practices of “persuasive structures of feeling” (287). Here, “structure of feeling” refers to a “form of practical consciousness that stands in uneasy relation to dominant systems of belief and education” (294). Thus, Trimbur urges us to understand agency as performance simultaneously within and at a distance from societal norms. Through his reading of Michel de Certeau, he asserts that “agency […] is the way people live the history of the contemporary, the way they articulate […] their desires, needs, and projects, giving voice to their lived experience as they
join their productive labors to the institutions and social structures they live within” (287).

Under this interpretation, agency is likened to a sense of solidarity between common individuals who act in accordance with the rules and conventions that surround them. Unlike Flower’s notion of agency, this action-oriented account presupposes that the agent is ready to engage in performance. Like Flower’s notion of agency, however, Trimbur’s agency is rhetorical in the sense that it interdependent; it requires an understanding of what is at stake for realizing a common goal, and going public to achieve it.

Secondly, Flower employs the work of philosopher Charles Taylor and theologian Richard Niebuhr to address the significance of personal, moral agency that “calls for a vocabulary of worth...in deliberation with others” (Taylor 24). According to Taylor,

Agents are beings for whom things matter, who are subjects of significance. [...] The essence of evaluation no longer consists in assessment in the light of fixed goals, but also and even more in the sensitivity to certain standards, those involved in the peculiarly human goals. [...] The centre of gravity thus shifts in our interpretation of the personal capacities. [...] The centre is no longer the power to plan but rather the openness to certain matters of significance. (104-105)

Unlike Trimbur’s action-oriented agent, Taylor suggests here that agency is determined by assessing one’s desires in relation to their significance to the assessor based in the world around him. Here, significance is “inarticulate” and open to “radical evaluation” (38-41): a sense of engagement and reflection with a community where similar desires (or feelings) are shared (107). Personal agency is moral, Taylor says, because one must be “capable of a reflection which is more articulate [...] because he characterizes his motivation at greater depth” (25). The desires that Taylor discusses are ones that are not merely ones the agent wants, but ones he deserves based on his normative understandings of society. An agent is an engaged individual and citizen, but as Niebuhr adds, an agent can be seen as “man-the-answerer, man engaged in
dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him” (56). Thus, similar to Flower’s rhetorical agency, personal agency here includes an interpretation of an inner self as well as a negotiated response to the world.

In calling upon these discussions of agency, Flower demonstrates that the various theories of agency that have a dialogic nature parallel to the rhetorical agency she promotes. From her task of putting her theory of rhetorical agency into the context of these ideas, it seems fair to say that certain forms of agency are (in a sense) rhetorical, and simultaneously, certain forms of agency are needed first for an individual to take rhetorical agency. Flower demonstrates the former assertion by connecting the theories of agency she discusses with sharing a reflective and public nature. As Trimbur says, “Representations of agency that we make available to ourselves are […] the result of determining how to formulate […] our feelings about the possibilities of consequential action and how we recognize and justify what we do” (288). With a performative model of agency, one must understand how he can act and negotiate his life within the world around him. Considering personal agency, Flower connects the need for an internal awareness that indicates a preparation to go public to the actual act of going public (205). Thus, if going public is indeed a requirement of taking rhetorical agency—and given Flower’s assertions, it is—then individuals who need to take rhetorical agency must necessarily have the kind of personal agency that is needed to go public. With this understanding, rhetorical agency is a sum of parts: a composite of agency types.

I do not mean to complicate the notion of rhetorical agency by referring to it as a “composite of agency types.” The point here is that rhetorical agency is a loaded concept. To take rhetorical agency, one needs to be able to do so. And in being able to do so, one seems to
need a couple of things: for starters, a sense of personal agency that makes one assess and support himself in the world around him, and a sense of action-oriented agency that focuses on the performance and demonstration of one’s needs within society. Thus, if Flower is right that our job as community workers is to affirm the agency of others, this sort of deconstruction of rhetorical agency shows various forms of agency that are needed to be affirmed in order to achieve a sense of rhetorical agency.

This orientation of affirmation gets at the heart of where it matters when structuring service learning programs and projects: succeeding in helping subordinated individuals where help is needed. What follows is an account of a writing program for juvenile offenders centered around cultivating kinds of agency necessary for rehabilitation, but that was malleable in nature to the ways in which agency is affirmed. Ultimately, I hope this analysis of the program will show that the task of teachers in community engagement is not a matter of affirming one specific form of agency, but the forms of agency that can help the individuals in need produce change for themselves in hopes of becoming rhetorical agents within society however, if at all, that may come.

Thoughts on *True Notebooks*

Mark Salzman’s *True Notebooks* documents his time at L.A.’s Central Juvenile Hall conducting a writing workshop called “Inside Out Writers” for juvenile offenders and offers insight on the potential such workshops can have in locating and affirming various sites of agency of those in need. As Sister Janet, a head figure in the program, says to Salzman when describing Inside Out Writers, the program was “designed to give young people like themselves
a chance to discover their own voices, to be heard, and to develop the skills of communication they would need to rebuild their lives” (33). “Would” is the operative word here, because it is hopeful but not definite or pushy. It is guided by building a part of the agency Flower describes, because it focuses on building a personal, yet also social, understanding of one’s life—one of her two-pronged assessment of rhetorical agency. The Inside Out Writers program gives students a chance to assert themselves in ways that will help prepare them for what Flower describes as the “the second, often intimidating requirement of rhetorical agency—*the act of going public*” (207). Put another way, by focusing on attaining the communication skills to help “rebuild their lives,” the program helps the juvenile offenders walk before they can run: to assist them in overcoming personal dilemmas in hopes to be able to become people who believe they are ready to reenter society.

What is important to the program’s mission is developing a sense of personal agency, and doing so on the students’ own terms. As Sister Janet says, the program “give[s] these young people a chance to express themselves, and feel that someone is listening. [The teachers] don’t tell their students what to write, or tell them that gangs and crime and drugs are wrong. They listen. They encourage their students to think for themselves, and then to write those thoughts down” (24). From this description, Sister Janet understands Inside Out Writers to be a program for cultivating a sense of personal agency similar to what Taylor and Niebuhr discuss because it offers a free and open chance for the writers to assess what they desire: they can write about anything they want. Hence, the writers are given the opportunity to engage in reflective action, where they are able to measure their desires for themselves in relation to what they imagine are the normative commitments of society.
This sense of agency is important in Salzman’s work because he does not proclaim to have any agenda outside of getting the students to write and to continue to write about what they want. Though his motives for joining Inside Out Writers were initially more questionable than others who lead such writing workshops for offenders—he wanted to get experience dealing with young criminals to do justice to a character in his forthcoming novel at the time—his goal in the actual workshop was to facilitate what the writers wanted for the writers’ ends. When asked during a presentation of his work and whether it would have been better to help students with their writing before they were felons, he says,

[M]y primary goal with the boys […] had never been to save them or improve them or even to get them to take responsibility for their crimes. I was there because they responded to encouragement and they wrote honestly; surely that sort of interaction between teacher and student has value, even if it does not lead to success beyond the classroom. (322)

As Salzman indicates, his purpose as a teacher was only to push their writing forward in whatever way the students wanted. He describes his students at having no trouble coming up with things to write about—from the absence of God to musings about a pet dog—but would push them slightly in ways if needed. Writing “distance” on the top of one of his student’s paper, for instance, helped bring about a story of a father who was always around but nevertheless negligent, and the love the student had for him despite it all (61-64). In worrying about helping students control their writing rather than trying to push to ensure that he was seeing a deeper sense of understanding within the writers themselves, Salzman did not push for signs of commitments to rehabilitation. Therefore, he did not measure success with the workshop by whether or not the students actually rebuilt their lives. Inevitably, such a litmus test for success is too grand. Success in the workshop certainly came in small doses. The students
were proud of themselves by becoming better writers, and thus built a sense of personal agency by foregrounding their desires and feelings within their texts.

But there was more. Salzman’s urge to keep their writing going helped create texts that prompted conversations for the boys about topics well beyond their words. In doing so, the group demonstrated instances of taking rhetorical agency by creating a rhetorical space for inquiry, discussion, and negotiation. For instance, one student, Kevin, wrote how he has overcome the lack of certain kinds of freedom while being in juvenile hall. He ends his three-part story with the following:

I have spiritual and mental freedom. I can lay on my bed knowing I may never be physical free again, but the Lord allows me to be at peace and have the sense of freedom. Writing […] helps me be free. I can create anything with my imagination, pencil, and paper, and before I know it I’ve created something that was in me the whole time, my pencil and paper just helped me let it out, freely. (98)

The importance of Kevin’s story comes immediately by describing his writing as an outlet. He acknowledges here that he may never leave the prison system, but he nevertheless can reflect on his actions and understand himself to be a better man. More than gaining this personal agency, however, Kevin’s story spurs responses from everyone in the group when Salzman asks him whether being in juvenile hall had been a positive experience and Kevin says yes. From there, the boys engage in a conversation about the aspects of imprisonment, some agreeing with Kevin with reservations and some completely dismissing the idea that juvenile hall could be good. As one student, Patrick, urges, “The only thing I learned here is how not to be caught next time […] Why should you change your life if all you hear all day is what a worthless piece of shit you are?” (100). Another student, Franscico, quickly responds, “If I hadn’t got locked up, I’d most likely be dead by now,” which Patrick refutes, saying, “But this isn’t living! It’s the same as
being dead, only you gotta be awake for it” (100). Though a short-lived conversation between the boys, the instance demonstrates their ability to engage with one another to reflect and discuss their shared concerns and frustrations of being imprisoned. Instances like this indicate that Inside Out Writers was more than just a lengthy writing workshop, but more along the lines of a public: a rhetorical space for the writers to come together and express their feelings and analyses of their shared situations. Thus, in merely responding to the writing, Salzman helps the boys come together and demonstrate a sense of rhetorical agency that emerged naturally, and on the students’ terms.

To a degree, we must measure the success of Salzman’s workshop on a smaller level—at least if we want to say it was successful at all. Measuring success by assessing the students’ commitment to change and reintegrating into society once outside of prison would show little, if anything. Of the outcomes we get in the book, most of the students were convicted and sent to serve long sentences. Nevertheless, we see success in the workshops in the way Cushman discusses the concept because the workshops helped the students reflect upon and alter the regular flow of events in the students’ lives through demonstrating personal agency. The students’ writings talked about in True Notebooks are not texts meant for public circulation to change societal views of young criminals, but texts that helped the students come together as a group, engage in conversation, and gain personal agency through articulated inner reflection.

It was this kind of reflective personal agency that Kevin demonstrated during his court case when he apologized to the parents of the boy he killed. It was this kind of agency that was acknowledged by Joe Sills, Kevin’s probation officer, prompting Sills to write a letter to the Judge of Kevin’s sentencing court case. He wrote,
Throughout my career at Central I have come across many kids and young men. Out of all the minors that I have come across I have never met any minor quite like [Kevin]. […] Faced with adversity and peer pressure in a place like this, Kevin Jackson could have chosen the easy way and given up on himself, but instead he has still maintained a positive self-image for others and continued to further his education. […] I am convinced that if given the chance Kevin has the tools to become successful in society. (310-311)

It is important to note that Sills’ letter is within the boundaries of a person-based orientation because it demonstrates the initial purpose of Inside Out Writers: to help students gain a voice and be heard, ultimately demonstrating a sense of personal agency to others. Here, Sills is not merely someone who is writing on Kevin’s behalf; Sills is a figure within “the system” who affirms Kevin’s agency, ultimately influencing him to become an advocate for change, if only in Kevin’s case.

Ultimately, the letter did not help reduce Kevin’s sentence; the court gave him the maximum sentence for second-degree murder and each attempted murder he had against him. But assessing Kevin’s agency or the success of the workshop based on their failure to alter the sentence is too drastic of a test. The sentence came from what Kevin did on the outside of juvenile hall, not within it. Within it, he showed that he was someone worth believing in.

I have argued in agreement with Flower that the ultimate task of the community worker should be to locate and cultivate agency within the individuals we serve, but with an understanding that affirmation should be aligned with a person-based approach that is aware of the forms of agency needing pursuit. It is helpful to acknowledge the power and expertise of universities as being beneficial to community work, but using our privileged statuses to empower others and affirm their agency may necessarily mean that our agendas—whether from the university specifically or from what was produced in a community partnership—be squashed. In
Salzman’s case, his agenda was not disrupted because of its loose parameters: he wanted to help his students with their writing, and he did. What follows in the final chapter is an account of squashed agendas at WwC, and they came to be so given the needs of the individuals served.
Working with Working with Conviction

Office Space

My role in the project came after Suzanne Shultz, the founder and program director of WwC, decided to collaborate with my graduate professor, David Coogan, to create the writing workshop. I was privileged to be a part of the collaboration by leading the workshop itself; I had control of the prompt used and structured it accordingly given our discussion before the workshop of what the personal statements should include. Thus, as Deborah Brandt would put it, my role in the program was as a “sponsor of literacy.” “Sponsors,” as Brandt suggests, “are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (16). As the leader of the workshop, I was able to control the flow and direction of the writing: moving the participants in directions that seemed to be appropriate given the project. Given what WwC wanted from the workshop—a way to foreground good qualities and commitments to rehabilitation—as well as suggestions from Coogan, I drafted and used the following prompt:

Personal Statement

Important and Specific Quality

Write about any one quality that you are particularly proud of, whether it is work related or not. Try to think of one that has made an impact in your life. Try and be as specific as possible. Make sure to explain how this quality has helped you in life. Specifically, when has it helped you? Why is it so important?
Conflict

Explain what has happened in your life to make someone not believe that you possess this quality. Why would they respond this way?

Resolution

Explain where you are now with the conflict. How are things different now? What steps have you taken to show that you still have this specific quality?

Some tips:
- Think about what you want the person reading to understand. Use details.
- Show your thoughts and feelings about the issue.
- There is no such thing as writing too much. The more you write, the more there is to select from for your final statement.

The prompt stresses that the participants be as honest as possible in their writing to establish a respectable character in the eyes of employers. Moreover, it tries to get at what Higgins, Long, and Flower call the “story-behind-the-story” by providing various strategies to help elaborate the writers’ events and perspectives (182). When we wrote, we went around the room in a typical workshop fashion: going piecemeal, sharing and commenting on everyone’s writing. Once the writing days were finished, I collected the materials and transcribed them, then met with everyone to see if there were any additional edits the participants wished to make. Once everyone was satisfied, I sent the master copies to WwC, then spent a final day reading aloud all of the final statements.

Going along with the prompt, the majority of the writing began with work-related triumphs: personal awards, promotions, special skills, etc. Janice and Nancy, for instance, both wrote about their experiences as nursing assistants and their care for others. The similarities between the women worked well with the discussions of the writing. Overall, everyone wrote fairly easily about their achievements and abilities. My involvement came from trying to suggest
what should be focused and elaborated on, or what should be omitted. As an example, Nancy first wrote (See Appendix B for final draft):

   My good quality is that I am a team worker. I love teamwork, people helping each other. Even though I might be in a different department I still would pitch in and help others with their work. I am a very helpful person.

From here, I suggested that she explain the background of her work: What department? What field of work? What would you help others with? Were there any specific instances where the help you gave was especially appreciated or recognized? These types of responses were typically employed throughout our sessions, some yielding much success and others not.

   At times in the workshop, I took on the perspective of a potential employer, or a “diverse stakeholder” as Higgins, Long, and Flower put it, to create a focal point for discussion and provide a way to keep the writing moving (183). Though no one had difficulty answering the first prong of the prompt, several of the group members had a difficult time getting over what the second part asked. I understood. It is a precarious request: asking someone to write about how their character has been subverted, ultimately trying to get them to write about their convictions. Nevertheless, not addressing it would seem like some slight of hand: a trick to be played on the potential employer. One participant, Nancy, had to be especially encouraged to write something to address the problem, but in a way that a potential employer would be satisfied with the answer and she would be comfortable putting down on paper. After working with her to respond in some way, the following response was ultimately produced:

   Though people may judge me, I have never stopped caring for others; I am, and always have been, a caring, helping, loving person. My heart is the same. But because of my conviction, I lost hope for myself.
Though short and to the point, the response covers the important part of the prompt in a crafty way. As Higgins and Brush assert, the job of the marginalized rhetor is to “connect enough with the rhetoric of others to be intelligible and persuasive, yet they must rebut rather than reproduce commonsense understandings” (696). As an ex-offender, Nancy’s move is rhetorical. Like Cushman suggests about someone she helped fill out a welfare application, “You present only that information that best persuades the caseworker to offer you the maximum allowance possible” (77). Similarly, though Nancy’s response does not answer the question directly, it alludes to the problem without eluding the conviction.

Overall, the statements were fairly short: no longer than a page in length. Some were shorter, depending on how much the individuals wanted to write and how often the participants came to the sessions. For instance, one participant, Derek, had the shortest statement and the least detailed because he only came to one of the writing sessions. Nevertheless, everyone that wrote answered, in some fashion, all of the prongs of the prompt.

Initially going into the project, my interests were to keep the writing as authentic as possible—to not make any changes unless they seemed necessary. It seemed to me that the link between gaining a sense of agency through the participants confidence as rhetors—“as people who have something to say and a right to say it in the presence of strangers” (Higgins, Long, Flower 191)—was contingent on them saying it without much interruption. Moreover, affirming public voice, as Jane Danielewicz describes it, “conveys the writer’s authority within a community and ensures a place of participation” (422). However, this personal account of agency was abandoned when the final drafts of the statements were edited and rewritten in parts by WwC to include a more professional, workplace vernacular. It was suitable for WwC to put a
nameplate on the statements that represented WwC the way WwC would want it done. All of the statements included the following:

I was recently selected to participate in Working with Conviction which is a peer support based program focused on empowering individuals to secure gainful employment. Only about ten individuals at a time are able to participate in Working with Conviction and I was selected from a pool of over 2,500 candidates to be part of the program. I was selected to participate in the program as a result of my high level of motivation.

Ultimately, this stamp from the program can be seen as a part of Cushman’s notion of reciprocity: where the individuals can use the program’s status to forward their achievements in employment, the program can be represented a validated program in the community of reentry culture.

Moreover, for the most part, the writing was not changed drastically. Very few parts were significantly changed. After describing his ability to build anything, for instance, Terrence said, “But I abused my gift for so long—now I’m scrambling to use it.” It was then replaced with, “In the past, I have failed to appreciate my gift.” Other changes, like incorporating lines such as “I am coping with my past and taking actions to move forward in a positive way” were made. Despite the overall minor changes, at the time, I was surprised. It seemed to me initially that WwC co-opted the writing in a way that usurped the agency of the individuals. As Gayatri Spivak claims, “The subaltern can not speak—that is, a person who is subject to a dominant culture is also subjugated by its discourse and therefore cannot speak with personal agency, in her own voice, unless she also rejects the language of that dominant discourse” (qtd. in Flower 135). In altering the texts in such a way, it seemed that WwC was, in a sense, hindering the participants by discrediting their intentions, lowering their voices, and taking away their agency.
While it is true that an image of personal agency may have been diminished, *agency* was not usurped, but simply relocated in a workplace discourse. Like Trimbur suggests, agency here is demonstrated by aiding in an opportunity for the participants’ to foreground their experiences to join the social structures they live within. With this action-oriented agency, the question is not a matter of deep expression, but rather, “it is a question of what is to be done” (287). Moreover, in his criticism of expressive writing in the classroom in “Judging Writing, Judging Selves,” Lester Faigley states that privileging “authentic voices” in student writing ignores the fact that “these same students will be judged by the teachers’ unstated cultural definitions of self” (140).

In a similar vein, the WwC participants will be judged by potential employers’ normative understandings of professional writing and proper vernacular. Thus, in order to help the participants become employed by helping the participants adopt a workplace vernacular, WwC was helping the participants join the institutions they hope to inhabit.

By altering the texts, slightly but significantly, WwC acted as a proxy for the participants engaged in what Cushman refers to as a “gatekeeper encounter.” As Cushman describes them, gatekeepers are the holders of

society’s material and ideological resources; their decisions and actions affect community members’ opportunities, liberty, intellectual growth, and pursuit of daily necessities. […] The gatekeeper is both the ‘judge’ and the ‘advocate’ […] and disadvantaged people must transfer their linguistic strategies from their community to the gatekeeping encounters. (*The Struggle* 13)

Going along with Cushman, WwC helped its participants in their struggle to become employed by assisting them in navigating a discourse that they are not a part of. Like Flower’s account of Raymond’s writing, agency is not located in the authenticity of the writing. Nevertheless, it is located in the capability of utilizing linguistic strategies to gain employment. Cushman responds
to this notion of co-option when noting that the marginalized individuals she worked with used proxies as a way to “obviate highly asymmetrical power relations…in order to gain information or resources” (*The Struggle* 164-165). Close to this, Janice told me during the second round of workshops that the workplace vernacular helped her prepare what to say and how to say it during one of her interviews. Thus, what is important here is not necessarily how the writing came to be, but what it could do for the participants.

In caring about nurturing a sense of authorial agency, I did not consider the needs of the individuals based in the analysis of discourse I argued for earlier, but in what I wanted out of the project. This is not to say that I don’t think cultivating an authorial presence isn’t necessary or worthwhile for the individuals. Of course I do. However, as Cushman would say, the need for such presence is not what is immediately at stake in daily life. And as I am saying now, it is not what should have been focused on. Adding lines about “moving forward in a positive way” may just be the sentiments that “the system” makes people feel are needed from ex-offenders when becoming employed and reentering society. Unlike myself, WwC was savvy enough to understand this.

What was gratifying was seeing everyone’s work put into action. On the final day of the workshop when we went to a job fair overcrowded with a gamut of unemployed people, no one was hesitant to use the personal statements when they filled out applications. As Flower states, “For everyday use […] agency depends on one’s power to control or least influence external realities—to be a mover and shaker—or at least to attempt to do so out of conscious, willed choice” (193). Through the collaboration from everyone in the workshop—the participants, myself, and WwC—creating the personal statements and using them in the world attempted at
this gaining this agency through control by trying acknowledge and subvert the discursive characterizations of the ex-offender that exist materially. In using their personal statements in the world, the participants tried to influence external realities by providing an alternative way to be understood so they could see material gain, thus becoming rhetorical agents.

Not Your Boss’ Personal Statement

Two months after the first two-week workshop was over, I went back to WwC to lead another one for the new participants of the group. However, there was only new participant—a nineteen year-old—and the majority of the original members were still a part of the group. Though I was happy to write with them again, seeing them at the Parole Office meant that they were not fully employed. Derek was the only one that was fully employed; Nancy had a part time position as a nursing assistant (a personal victory for her, given that this is job she actually wanted). Nevertheless, the workshop proceeded like it did the first time and everyone who had been a part of the workshop before was satisfied to do so. When I asked everyone if there was anything they wanted to specifically address or change with the writing, Janice told me that it was good practice to write the statements because it helped her prepare for what to say in interviews. That said, we did not pick up with the last drafts. We wrote fresh.

At first, there was a lot of overlap in the writing. However, the last things Janice wrote before the first writing session ended took a turn in a different direction. She read the following:

Being compassionate was and still is a good quality that was instilled in me through my mother. One of the commandments is to love one another and that I always did until a relationship that I started and my feelings got too involved that it resulted as physical abuse. I had to make up my mind to leave or stay. I didn’t feel compassionate for others for a long time until I got back spiritual with God
and led me to a great guy who changed my life around and made me stronger within myself.

I paused for a moment after she read. We had to end the session almost immediately after, but before we left, I asked her where the writing was coming from. She laughed a little and said she didn’t know. I was amazed, and somewhat taken off guard, when the writing turned from a fairly normal account of pride and being compassionate to a story of physical abuse and recovery.

Two days later in the next session, we picked the writing on the first section of the prompt. However, the mood in the room was rough. One participant, Maurice, would not write or talk. Nancy did not want to write at first, but eventually came around to doing so. After we wrote, Janice read (See Appendix C for final draft):

The good quality that I have is being compassionate and having faith and strength has made me to have strong beliefs that I truly share with my God. It was a conflict that I went through that I let my guards down and my compassionate ways was violated. Arguments and physical abuse left me in shambles. I lost hope and faith. I started reading the Bible more and having my beliefs restored again to now have compassionate feelings what I do care and have true feelings again.

I wasn’t as surprised this time when she read aloud. Clearly, this was off topic given the purpose of the workshop. But when she read, it didn’t matter. What mattered was what seemed needed in the situation: conversation and, perhaps, an outlet with pen and paper. More than that, it immediately seemed to me like a site for cultivating a sense of personal agency: a moment where reflection and response to actions against her could prove beneficial to Janice as she engaged with others. Unlike initially where I did not identify the problem for the WwC project to take on, I did then in real time, based on what seemed needed not by the project or myself, but for Janice.
I didn’t try to reign the writing back to focus on an audience of employers. Instead, I suggested that Janice write more about her loss of faith.

A parallel with my question to Janice can be drawn between my experience and Salzman’s experience with Kevin when he asked Kevin whether being in juvenile hall was a good experience. In Salzman’s case, his question prompted a brief, yet rich discussion between his students who all felt the pangs of imprisonment. Similarly, my question sparked a conversation with Nancy about a traumatic event after church service the previous night. After we finished writing again I asked Nancy to share what she wrote, and the following was read

(See Appendix D for final draft):

I was just in a situation where someone tried to hurt me again. I was almost thrown back into a situation where I didn’t care again. I had to sit back and think: Nancy, you are not that type of person. I just don’t understand why people hate to see you change or do good.

The conversations began to take over the room; everything that was said dealt with personal trauma, whether in the past or present. In response, I told them to write about it.

Choosing not to intervene in what was written was taking advantage of a tactical opportunity. By not guiding Janice back to writing for employment purposes and instead suggesting that she continue writing about her loss of faith. I disrupted the workshop by abandoning its goal—to produce a personal statement for employment—for what seemed to me as something more worthwhile for her to pursue. This then led to everyone else following suit in their writing and conversation. Thus, within the project itself, I employed a tactical change with the direction of the project. As argued earlier, this tactical, person-based approach takes kairos and the project-orientation Mathieu argues for quite literally, and is done so for what is benefitting the individuals we serve. If Mathieu is right that tactical writing “rarely transacts or
accomplishes anything concretely” (55), then we need to look to what is said to be, or at least seems to be, apparent and needed in the moment so we can try our best to create something worthwhile.

The connection between kairos and materialism is important here when thinking about a person-based approach because the approach calls for an understanding of what to pursue and why at a particular time. As Crowley and Hawhee suggest, rhetors “attuned to kairos should consider a particular issue as a set of different political pressures, personal investments, and values, all of which produce different arguments about an issue” (62). Thus, with any given issue, there are other issues that are connected to it. Crowley and Hawhee use gun control as an example, linking it to violence and the stakes in the issue police units and court systems have when preventing violent crimes (62). Thus, though we cannot address everything at issue in a particular time, we should be attuned to the “ever shifting nuances” for opportunities of inquiry (63). As I have argued, materialism provides us a way of understanding material, objective features of society, past and present, in a meaningful way so we can better interpret these nuanced movements as moments of productive intervention. Furthermore, a materialist perspective affords us a way of focusing our work on what is empirical, what we can see, so we can base our interventions in things that are known to be instantiated, rather than things we speculate.

This connection is important in understanding what happened at WwC for me to change the nature of the workshop. The change did not come because the participants specifically vocalized the need to write and discuss their personal problems. However, as I have maintained throughout this work, had they directly expressed this desire, it would have been necessary for
me to oblige. Moreover, the push did not come from postulating outside of what I immediately experienced. Though we can understand things like the discursive characterizations of the ex-offender to be material, and we can see how these characterizations hinder ex-offenders from reentering society, we cannot initially see how these characterizations, or anything else in their lives, are factors. One can assume these things all day long, but until there are concrete instantiations that prompt inquiry, there is no reason to accommodate the concern. I know nothing about mental states, and as McGee cautions us to realize, such things are completely separated from language and reality (Rhetoric 139). However, when Janice put down her thoughts and shared them, as well as when the rest of the group wrote and discussed similar problems afterward, they were no longer merely mental states, but material indications of real problems.

Of course, we can explain this situation in a much more simple way than couched in materialism: when Janice wrote about her abusive relationship twice, I thought it was worth asking about and I was right. Writing about it, however, made the problem become an objective factor that could be actually seen; we came to know through writing and conversation that Janice was going through a rough time. Once this was on the table, it prompted everyone else to share and engage one another with similar frustrations. Because I came to understand these points of crisis, it seemed worthwhile to shift gears with our writing. It was a kairotic shift because it seemed opportune given Janice’s, as well as everyone else’s, expressed dilemmas; it was material because the shared problems that were once out of sight within the workshop became instantiated through dialogue and known as hindering their lives in the present.
Given what was being discussed and where the writing went in the second workshop, what seemed worthwhile and desired by the group was to express in writing (or mere conversation, for Terrence and Maurice) what was bothering them, which unfortunately, was a lot. Terrance, for instance, did not write about the issue, but he shared a lot about his circular problem of being unemployed: he was having trouble with his girlfriend because he didn’t have a job, but he was also unmotivated at times to go out and look for one because of how people were viewing him. More stories about abuse surfaced, and others about the pains that come from being unemployed. I helped the only way I know how: by assisting them in generating and controlling their writing.

On the third day of the workshop, Suzanne Shultz suggested that we mention assistance was available from the Parole Office’s psychologist if the workshop became too traumatic. With a similar concern, I asked everyone to pause and read everything that they had written, and also think about the discussions within the workshop. I then asked whether they wanted to stop and focus the writing elsewhere. I reassured them that I would not mind, and that I did not want them to tackle anything they did not feel comfortable writing about. Everyone responded by saying that they were glad they were writing, saying that it was therapeutic. With this said, we continued our work in the same manner.

The writing workshop began focusing on elaborating the narratives of the people who chose to write, and the mood of the workshop and the nature of the writing stayed the same. I helped everyone craft another personal statement—some of them by heavily utilizing the previous statements and others by taking from what was written in the second workshop—that could be used for employment purposes, in addition to the personal writing we drafted (for the
people who wrote) that they kept for themselves. In creating a final personal narrative and privileging it in the workshop, even if it is never shared with anyone outside of WwC, agency was located in a third place—in the therapeutic, recovery culture. During the final day of the workshop when the drafts were finalized, Nancy smiled and said, “I’m so proud. I’m going to hang it in my room” (Nancy). Like Taylor and Niebuhr’s discussion of personal agency, Nancy reflected upon her life to create something she is proud of that responds to the people who have caused her pain.

I was taking a risk when switching gears with the workshop; the new direction we took could have backfired by causing complete distress for the participants and, in turn, caused problems for WwC. Nevertheless, I operated within the boundaries of a person-based approach because my moves were aligned with the general purpose of WwC: to help ex-offenders successfully reintegrate into society. Moreover, I was not acting outside of what the participants wanted or what WwC would permit. Of course opportunities for failure were present; kairotic moves such as the one I employed will always have room for failure. However, as discussed earlier, insufficiency is not the issue. Given a person-based orientation, the workshop was a success. Writing the personal narratives helped nurture a sense of rhetorical agency in part by demonstrating “outward indications of an activated inner life” (Flower 200). In coming together to stories of frustration and trauma, the participants of WwC demonstrated that they can come together as a public and share emotional work of engaged interpretation necessary for rhetorical agency. Thus, what was needed here in the everyday life was not necessarily writing that could be accepted in a workplace environment, but a place for personal writing and reflection. I do not
assume that the writing we did fixed the problems everyone was facing, but know that I did what I could in the limited time we had to help.
Flower suggests that affirming the agency of others can mean “teaching ourselves to see and represent what the popular scripts deny” (201). I have argued that the aperture of this viewing lens should remain wide to locate various images of agency and to focus in when agentive spots are necessary to be nurtured given the daily needs of the community members we seek to help. Furthermore, as a way of initially structuring projects, community workers can embrace a materialist rhetoric in order to better interpret ways of intervention. Once a project is created, one should make himself ready for the kairotic moments that emerge and seem necessary to pursue, and then do so: to be tactical and abandon the goals of a project the moment it seems less valuable than something else.

Ultimately, my suggestions are geared toward an attempt to ensure that no matter what the outcome of our work is, the individuals we are trying to aid get something out of the deal, or at least have every opportunity to do so. I have used “people we serve” throughout this thesis for a reason—that’s our job. Thinking of service learning work any other way is unfortunate and questionably self-serving. As Cushman warns us, “We exclude many of the people we’re trying to empower for the sake of positing […] liberating ideas” (250). By focusing on what individuals need in the day-to-day by being aware to their understood—or directly stated—needs, the theorizing Cushman worries about can remain absent.
This person-based approach I promote is a lot to take on. It revels in fleeting moments of opportunity, and thus is always accompanied by opportunity for failure. It calls for all community partners to sacrifice common notions of success. It will never fix large problems. The change that comes with it, if at all, may never mean anything to the world. It can, however, mean the world to the people we serve. And at the end of the day, that’s all that matters.
Works Cited


Long, Elenore. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*. Lafayette: Parlor Press,


Probation and Parole District One. *WORKING WITH CONVICTION*. Richmond: Probation and


Appendix A: Working with Conviction Pamphlet

Our mission is to find creative ways to mentor convicted felons who are highly motivated, dedicated to self improvement, and capable of securing employment.

Our ultimate goal is to decrease recidivism and enhance public safety in the City of Richmond.

Our program at District One was founded by PO Suzanne Shultz in 2010 together with DCPO Scott Ridge, DCPO Amanda Bass, SPO Sonya Toney, PO Essica Holcomb, and PO Sherla Hendricks. Many thanks to Chief Michael A. Wright of District One for his continued support of this innovative effort.

Our inspiration for Working with Conviction comes from an employment program created by SPO Cliff Cummings of Pocatello, Idaho.

Working with Conviction
Probation & Parole District One
Proudly Serving the City of Richmond

TEL 804.786.0251 EXT 158
EMAIL SUZANNE.SHULTZ@VADOC.VIRGINIA.GOV
We are always looking for opportunities to collaborate!

Probation & Parole District One
208 Olive Hill Way, Richmond, VA 23219
Throughout my life, I have always been recognized as being an extremely helpful and caring person. One of my strengths is working with others as a team. Throughout my work experience, I have always pitched in to help others in the workplace, even if it was not required. Throughout my career, I have been known for my dedication to helping others and because of this I have been awarded with two certificates for teamwork.

My helpfulness and caring personality have been demonstrated through my work, specifically involving my patients. Two patients I will never forget were Mrs. Sacove and Mrs. Cook. They were very demanding: almost making it impossible for anyone to do anything for them. However, I was not deterred by this challenge and I made sure I was always there to help them. Though people may judge me, I have never stopped caring for others; I am, and always have been, a caring, helping, and loving person. My heart is the same. However, as a result of my conviction, I lost hope for myself. Since then, I have taken many steps to gain back what I lost.

I was recently selected to participate in Working with Conviction which is a peer support based program focused on empowering individuals to secure gainful employment. Only about ten individuals at a time are able to participate in Working with Conviction and I was selected from a pool of over 2,500 candidates to be part of the program. I was selected to participate in the program as a result of my high level of motivation.

Participating in this program has allowed me to open up and speak more freely about my conviction and my feelings. At this point, I am able to cope with my past in a constructive way and move forward towards a positive and productive future.
One of my strongest qualities is being compassionate toward others. When in need, I realize that and I share my time with them if they need a shoulder to cry or lean on. I will be there no matter what--through illness or whatever. Being compassionate was and still is a good quality that was instilled in me through my mother. I was born to be compassionate. That’s why I got into nursing: being for someone through thick and thin.

One of the commandments is to love one another, and I always did until a relationship that I started. Things escalated in our relationship—it got physical. He broke me down. I just remember thinking, “You’re doggin’ me now. You’re doggin’ my feelings.” I didn’t feel comfortable being with him anymore, even though I had compassion for him. I knew he was taking advantage of me. I had to make up my mind: stay there to be dogged, or leave. He was destroying me, and destroying my ability to be compassionate. I couldn’t put up with it, so I left. After the relationship went downhill, I stopped caring for others—I only cared about me. When you lose trust in a person and you stop believing in that person, you lose compassion.

I can remember being that person for a long time, and because he used me, I felt very violated. He knew that caring for others was my weak point, even though it was my strong point. People can break you down until the point where do don’t want to be bothered: living like a hermit. My compassion was used against me and it made me have my guard up. I stopped caring. I stopped being a determined, confident, and compassionate person. I stopped going to church and stopped believing, especially when my mom passed. I was angry with God at the time. I was left in shambles and it was hard to get back to myself.

Then I got back to focusing on God again and building my faith up: keeping Him first, because He always has his hands on us. He has lead me to be to be compassionate again, for he has always been and was when dying on the cross for us—for me. Through my struggle to and fro, God always had his hands on me, guiding me. I just didn’t have a spiritual ear to listen to him at the time. I have to keep my feet on holy ground, because He has made me stronger.

My mind was cloudy for years, but I think clearly now. I have resolved my issues with being compassionate by thinking of the 3 R’s of life: recognizing, realizing, and rectifying. I
understand the problems from my past and I take responsibility for my actions. I now speak up on honesty and faith in God. I’ve learned it’s never too late to start fresh, and I have become a better and stronger person because of it.
Appendix D: Nancy’s Final Draft in Workshop II

Nursing has helped me love again. I didn’t think I had any love left in me because of my past. But, as time went on I gave a lot of caring and love out to others. I give out love and care to friends, families, and strangers. I even took a stray cat in. I guess I’m giving out now what I have missed.

I’m in another situation where I always help people and it gets thrown back in my face. I put my trust in this person and everyone told me not to trust or be around him. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and I stuck with him. He turned on me and I found out that everyone was right. I’m angry and hurting because of this situation. I was almost thrown back into a situation where I didn’t care again. I had to sit back and think: “Nancy, you are not that type of person. Don’t let anything take it away from you.”

People are discouraging. People ask me, “Are you still going down there?” I come down to Working with Conviction because I want to be here. I do not let anyone get me down. I’m glad we’re writing, because I’m angry. I’m boiled up, and I don’t want to take it out on the wrong people. It’s like every time I give someone a chance it backfires. I just hope everything works out for the best. I’m not trying to make this situation worse than it is. I’m coping and dealing with it. I’m not going to let anyone take my heart again, because I got it back. I thought I did not have any love in me anymore because of my past. My past made me put up a shield between myself and others. Now I have taken the shield down and I try to care and love everyone no matter what.