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Assessing Audience for Community Initiatives

Fall 2006 / Columns

Lisa Loch interviews Dr. Tommy Darwin, Director of the Professional Development and Community Engagement Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

A discussion exploring the best ways for writing centers and other university organizations to match their expertise to community needs.



Dr. Tommy Darwin

Last year the **Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC)** at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) began to offer writing consultations to the Austin community two nights a week at the George Washington Carver Museum and **Library**. At this stage of the project's evolution, the UWC administration seeks to learn about effective strategies to assess the needs of the target audience for this and future community initiatives. In search of a knowledgeable perspective, Lisa Loch, doctoral student and Assistant Director of the UWC, sought out the expertise of Dr. Thomas J. (Tommy) Darwin, Director of the **Professional Development and Community Engagement Program** at UT for the following interview, conducted on September 28, 2006, in Austin, Texas.

LISA LOCH: Can you tell me about your role and what your interest is broadly in community engagement and outreach?

TOMMY DARWIN: Universities need to be engaged in their communities both because they have an obligation to the public and for pedagogical reasons. To me engagement implies reciprocity—it involves not only people from a college campus going off campus to work with people and bringing their knowledge to bear and applying it, but also bringing community knowledge and expertise

onto campus. We are all actually part of one big community—universities can work to connect the different parts. We are amazingly privileged, those of us who get to spend our time in universities, so we have an obligation, in a very pragmatic sense. There is also a historical tradition in the American university which says that education should be engaged (as in experiential learning or service learning). As I began working with graduate students on their professional development, it became clear that they needed to put their work in a meaningful context. So if I want to work with graduate students to provide experiences that will enable them to get the tools that they need to pursue what they want to pursue, it has to be put into a context—it has to be made meaningful. And the way you do that is to get engaged in meaningful situations with people who matter and with whom you share an interest and commitment to the outcomes. That is my strongest sense as to why this work is so critical.

LL: So your strongest motivation is as a teacher?

TD: Yes, well the work that we all do has to be made meaningful. It's not meaningful in the abstract. It's not meaningful until we see some really profound relevance. That may be the relevance of "I got published in this given journal and I want to reach these scholars." Okay, so this isn't necessarily about "It's got to have a direct community outlet." But I do think it's all community driven in the sense that we all exist in multiple communities. None of us exists in a vacuum, so we have to actively understand our contexts. In a consulting class it's about making connections that enable you to put your expertise to work...typically off-campus. In a writing class it's about finding the intellectual community you want to impact. So this is not necessarily on-campus/off-campus thing . . . it's ultimately about making a difference and developing the skills and opportunities to do so.

"Communities need to be taken care of, worked on, and maintained, like any long-term relationship."

LL: Before we get into the specific complexities of assessing audience, how do you define community?

TD: There are three aspects of community that I think are important. One is certainly geographic, whether literally geographic, or conceptually geographic as in the geography of discipline—as in how we group ourselves together in terms of conferences and journals. It revolves around a notion of space—where does everybody get together?

Community also involves a sense of identification with a meaning and purpose. An important aspect of communities is that they exist for a reason—there is something that pulls them together. If someone says, "Well, we need community on campus," the first question I have is, "Community for what? Why are people coming together?" Some reason, some sense of shared meaning.



Lisa Loch

Which leads to the third aspect, which is that communities are temporal. They are living things, they come and they go. One can inhabit multiple communities at the same time. They're not as reified as people tend to treat them. They certainly involve groups of people with shared identities, but they exist in a given time and space for a particular reason. If there is anything I've learned in doing the work of getting multiple people together, it's that giving people a common reason to get together is really critical. What you have to accept is that communities will have a tendency to evolve and change over time, and even disperse. The language that we use to define and describe ourselves in community is very important, and there may be multiple versions which pull people together.

So when I think of community I think about the people who are coming together in specific places for specific purposes for a specific time, and that time may be a day, or 150 years, it just depends. But there is a reason, there are things that are shared in common, shared identity, all of which leads to the idea that communities are accomplishments, they are not givens. In some ways it's a shame that we don't have a verbal form of community. Community as something we do, not just something that is. I suppose that we have the word "communicate."

LL: Like communing?

TD: [*laughing*] Yeah, although that has perhaps unfortunate implications! It's an abstract concept, but it is a very fluid concept.

LL: So if writing centers want to bring what they do to larger spheres, what do you recommend as first steps?

TD: A couple things, and they are related. I think that the first thing is to understand where people are, where they are trying to go, where the gap between those two things is, and trying to fill in that gap. People have aspirations. They have a sense of what's possible and we can work towards those aspirations. For me the challenge is to ask what the needs are in general and, on the other hand, to ask, "Given what we can do by virtue of the fact that we are a writing center, what might we be able to do to address those needs?" I

mean this in the sense that a community's needs are more than what they appear to be on the surface and writing can have a broader impact than we might think. What else is writing or what else can it do? The production of knowledge, the clarification and management of tensions and perspectives. So instead of saying, "How do we do writing for the community?" you might ask, "How might we use our capabilities to manage tensions between perspectives in a community?" It opens up a whole lot more possibilities. There is a sense of not limiting oneself to preconceived slots and capacities.

"The most daunting aspect of any endeavor is overcoming the initial inertia."

I'm not saying that we should make stuff up. I mean we're not going to do economic development—that is not our expertise. But, by virtue of what writing enables one to do, clarifying thoughts and bridging gaps—and managing tensions. Not to resolve them necessarily, but to manage them in a productive way. There are certain key people to talk with off campus, and it is valuable to go and talk with them and identify what those needs are. So if you and folks from the UWC went in this town to talk with groups concerned with mental health issues, say, you would first just listen to what their problems are and ask questions and then say, "Well what can we do to address those and how broadly can we construe writing?" That's how I think you get really interesting projects to emerge. I have a Ph.D. in communication studies, so what am I doing involved with community development work in a broad sense? I don't have a degree in that or a policy background. But I am in the role because of what I know and can help with. You are in the business of thinking creatively and understanding problems. That is also very valuable. You have a wide array of capabilities and a wide understanding of what the possibilities are in the community so that you can see where to create the linkages. It starts with what the issues are, and the aspirations—it's not all negatively driven.

I think the last important thing is looking for the expertise that is already in play. That is really important with the whole idea of reciprocity that I was talking about earlier. With a given issue there would be people in the writing center who could help formulate effective arguments but there are also people in the community that have developed effective modes of writing, and rhetorics, that could then inform what's going on in the writing center. You always have to ask yourself what all you do to engage these issues in a mutual way, and then I think it gets really powerful. You are not going to get away from the writing, it's just what else your writing expertise enables you to do.

LL: So in terms of approach to the audience or prospective community, what attitude do you recommend?

TD: I think the attitude has to be one of "Shut up and listen"—I'm here to learn for a while. Early on, I developed my own variation of the Hippocratic oath, "First do no harm." My oath became "First shut up." A huge part of engagement is just regularly showing up and being there, listening, taking things in—wanting to bring expertise to bear, but very much in a collaborative way. One way you know you are in collaboration is that you are not completely defining how things should be done. You're allowing for other parties to bring in their expertise as well.

You also have to be positive. You don't really engage unless you really believe that there are things to be done. You have to avoid the cynicism and pessimism

as much as possible. And then, once you listen and once you learn, your next question is, "Who can help me with this?" or "Who can help me do this?" or "Who can I partner with?" You have to almost be willing to not get any credit, at least in the short term.

You also have to always be looking for the people who are similarly interested in moving things forward. So, we should listen and then work to collaborate in an informed, inviting way. Notice and point out what is already being done and the expertise that is already there, so it's not "You can't do anything and I'm going to fix you." It's more collaborative: "You're doing these things, I can do these things—together we can do more things."

LL: Do you have some specific recommendations for writing centers considering an expansion of their services to a larger community?

TD: I have three things to suggest. The first is to adopt a pilot project mentality and only take on one project at a time. Prioritize and focus on what is possible in the short term. Ask yourselves "What can we do next week?" Also, remember that it is not as much about the project as it is about finding synergy.

The second is to take a project management approach. Create a plan, set goals, define time frames, identify resources, and just get started and keep going. A doctoral student in aerospace engineering taught me that the hardest part of space flight is the first few inches, because you are moving hundreds of thousands of pounds sitting completely still. But, once you get it moving . . .

The last recommendation is to build in a reflection phase. Anticipate transition points and conduct an honest appraisal at regular intervals. Ask yourselves if you want to keep doing it and if you have the resources to continue. Be honest about your commitments and capabilities, especially at the beginning. It is much better to decline a collaboration than to take something on you cannot complete. Look for ways to get different projects to dovetail with each other. A good reason to do a project, for example, is that it will enable you to learn things that you can use in multiple arenas.

Finally, take a long view of your time frame. Lasting community collaborations just don't happen fast. One of my favorite phrases in this regard is "incremental but exponential." It may start slow (back to our space flight), but if you are patient and persistent, it will build up momentum. Remember to take time (especially early on) listening and building relationships—oh, and also have realistic expectations about what it means to be done and think in terms of perfecting your process as well as solving problems. Ideally, what you figure out how to do in one situation can be adapted to other situations.

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