

# The Research Paper as an Act of Citizenship: Possibilities and Pragmatism

> Tim N. Taylor

By focusing on local problems or issues, student writers can craft research essays that exemplify civic engagement, a practice that reaffirms composition's tacit tradition from classical rhetoric and the educational philosophy of John Dewey.

Composition's emphasis on community-based rhetorical practice and the re-emergence of writing as a civic act are interesting, exciting, and fruitful trends. It seems that more and more, whether in conference papers, articles in professional journals, or the swapping of practitioner lore on various listservs, composition instructors are returning to a focus on where universities are situated, where students live, and the problems and issues that encompass those areas. In particular, we have seen the rising status of service-learning and an allied emergence of what is being termed variously civic engagement, rhetorical democracy, or community writing. In fact, the textbook industry, which tends to be a conservative force in our profession, as Robert Connors so aptly points out,<sup>1</sup> has even seen this emphasis as a toehold for growth, as shown by many rhetorics/readers on the market: Michael Berndt and Amy Muse's *Composing a Civic Life*, Thomas Deans's *Writing and Community Action*, Marjorie Ford and Elizabeth Schave Shill's *Community Matters*, and Paul Collins's *Community Writing*, to name a few.

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Many instructors are drawn to service-learning and civic-engagement writing projects because they sense that these types of writing assignments make their instruction "real" in the sense that students see the effect of their rhetorical

practice; their writing projects connect to volunteer experiences, or their writing serves a more overtly professional purpose other than the traditional academic essay. Service-learning tied to composition has created changes in how instructors teach, making them seriously rethink instructional methods. As someone who has taught service-learning college composition courses, I recognize that it can be

quite the juggling act, but an instructor can adjust how much service-learning takes part in the day-to-day workings of the course, a topic which has been discussed at great length.<sup>2</sup> In a broader view, service-learning as it is practiced today—whether in the forms of (to borrow from Thomas Deans) writing for the community, writing about the community, or writing with the community—uses some approaches that are quite different from the usual work of traditional composition instruction.

However, the motivation that both service-learning and civic engagement fall under—the broad desire to have students work on problems and issues within their smaller communities, cities, states, or regions—is decidedly old ideas in new textbooks, because this type of rhetorical practice has foundational connections to both classical rhetoric and the educational philosophy of John Dewey. As many practitioners relate, they are drawn to writing assignments connected to service-learning and/or civic-engagement initiatives because these writing projects can create greater ownership of the classroom for students. Based on volunteer experiences or focused on local problems that affect students directly, the writers actively research and reflect on problems within their communities and our democracy. Instructors can help students explore problems and issues with their localities, states, or regions, and this goal can foster greater motivation and a proper focus on being an active citizen *within* and *beyond* the composition classroom. These initiatives reinforce the core values of our profession.

This civic-minded focus is important to me as an instructor, as I'm sure it is for many others. And in this essay I provide examples from my own teaching practice to show a method to practice civic engagement through the collegial rite of passage, the research-based argument paper. My community-based argumentative writing assignment provides an example of how students can rhetorically take action in their own communities. Second, I will then connect the reemergence of civic engagement to our traditional yet powerful conceptions of rhetoric and education, the ancient foundation from classical rhetoric and the "tacit tradition" from John Dewey (Emig, Fishman). The profession's revitalized focus on local communities provides a savvy civic ethos that represents a return to our pedagogical roots.

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## The Research Paper as an Act of Citizenship

For those who admire and respect service-learning initiatives but do not necessarily want to align every course they teach with service-learning experiences, there are many possibilities to practice civic engagement, many of which are probably taken from the recycling bin of composition pedagogy. Whether in an introductory composition class or an argument-based composition class, the research-based argu-

mentative paper lends itself to exploring a local or civic problem. I am not arguing that this is the only route to guide students toward making their writing become a civic act or using writing to explore their surroundings and communities. Rather, the use of the research/argument paper is particular to my own teaching practice, and I'm confident there are other rhetorical aims that can reinforce civic engagement. (In fact, Derek Owens's work, *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*, offers various methods for such teaching practice.<sup>3</sup>) The writing assignment I propose is one that involves both a traditional research essay and a cover letter.

For my own argumentative essay assignments, it is mandatory that students' problem/solution or "taking a stand" essays must address an issue that can then be presented to a typically nonacademic audience. And the topics must be more local than the usual suspects for research/argumentative papers (cloning, gun control, the death penalty, et al.); even if they choose well-known issues or problems the students must then address an "outside" audience like a mayor, alderman, legislator, senator, or journalist, for example. My student writers have found success working with smaller, more local topics or issues that they have had experience with, a problem or issue that can be changed or at least addressed, one which is usually researched through both print and nonprint sources (usually interviews). In addition to having such an argument paper focused on a local or civic problem (I usually let the topics be, at the broadest range, statewide issues), a requirement of the project demands that students create cover letters that directly address an outside reader or readers who can address or provide feedback to the student's argument about the problem or issue. These cover letters, in essence, are introductions to why students are writing to their readers and a short synopsis of what problems their papers address. The cover letter not only provides an informational and persuasive bridge to the outside reader and the formal academic essay, but it also lets student writers use a format they need to be familiar with. From my years of experience using this type of assignment, these writing projects have been enlightening and fruitful. I have learned quite a bit about campuswide, community, and statewide problems. But, most important, students have been engaged with the topics because they typically write about subjects that affect them every day or issues that are up for debate in the immediate future, which reflects the importance of *kairos*, the timing and awareness of one's argument in a greater context.

Based on student feedback about these writing assignments, or, as one of my students called them, "new school" research papers, I have found that the outside-audience aspect of the project and students' desire to address real problems made the argument paper and research process not only educational but also enjoyable and exciting. Just as students write documents for service agencies through service-learning's "writing for the community" conception, my students tend to be more motivated because they're not just writing for an academician. They have, as students might say, "a real audience," a phrase I often bristle at because that implies I am not "real." Nevertheless, students find topics about which they have passion, issues that tick them off, problems that are complex, motivating them to do re-

search, to sift through perspectives, and to voice their opinions with greater ethos and logos. In many course evaluations, students have noted that researching a so-called real problem and addressing an outside reader made them care more about their writing, giving them a feeling of, as we might say, rhetorical agency. One anonymous student comment effectively summed up this type of writing project: “The research paper was actually real. We made our writing do something.”

My goal for these projects is to emulate the ancient aim of classical rhetoric, which was to instruct students to be active and savvy citizens of the polis, the city-state, the democracy. The assignment attempts to foster a similar awareness, care, and rhetorical activity about the areas in which students live, pursuing the Ciceronian ideal of teaching students to be ethical and active participants in public life. In a much more modern rendering, what Paul Lindholdt terms “applied composition,” these writing projects help students focus on their places in the world. As Lindholdt remarks, “On a most intimate level, place-based attachments

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[. . .] can empower citizens to shape the future” (242). The writing projects put deliberative rhetoric on a more immediate level—the places where students live, work, or go to school. To provide an idea of the various topics generated by students, what follows are examples to show how these research papers exemplify the practice of “applied” civic rhetoric.

The first year I assigned this type of writing project, I was a doctoral student at the University of Alabama, and my students there addressed campus-wide, city-wide, and statewide issues. As I progressed from graduate studies to my full-time teaching position, the locally based research paper has worked exceptionally well, including where I teach now, a large metropolitan community college (St. Louis Community College at Meramec) where students know their urban/suburban setting quite well. Many have lived in the St. Louis metropolitan area most of their lives, and this placedness caters well to the paper. For example, one of my students, a St. Louis city resident, presented her position essay to the mayor. In her paper, she called for implementation of a more comprehensive waste management and recycling program in the city. It was well-researched, logically coherent, and interesting, even though it was, literally, about garbage. Another student, a self-described “working mom,” pulled from her experience of eating with her daughter during the lunch period at her grade school. She was so befuddled and sickened by the experience that she addressed her school district’s need for more nutritional food and a longer lunch period by sending her argument to both the school district’s superintendent and the local parent-teacher association.

One young woman, a December high school graduate who took classes at our community college the spring after early graduation, used her friend’s experi-

ence with dating abuse (both physical and mental) to draft a persuasive and important position essay. In her argument essay she proposed that her high school (she submitted it to the principal and the school board) should create a seminar about “teen dating,” an educational program that would be implemented in the sophomore year much like a peer-pressure seminar already mandatory in the first year of physical education classes. A writer in the fall of 2004 crafted a position paper calling for a formal policy regarding cellular phones on Meramec’s campus not only to curb their annoying rings in classes but also to address widespread academic misconduct. As he related, students were and probably still are using text messaging and phone cameras to relay answers and quizzes/exams to their peers. Like others before him, this student did traditional research through articles from journals, magazines, and newspapers, but he also employed field research gained by informally polling students, interviewing professors at Meramec and other universities in the St. Louis metropolitan area, and doing research on cellular policies at other institutions for points of comparison. In their locally focused argument papers, students typically draw from such varied sources—personal experience, firsthand observation, interviews, and traditional text-based research.

In a similar move, drawing from his interest in and previous writing in response to John Abell’s article, “The Neoliberal World Order: The View from the Highlands of Guatemala,” in the “Globalization, World Markets, and the Carnival against Capitalism” section of the textbook *Writing Arguments*, Beau, a student in my College Composition 2 course in fall 2004, expanded his criticism of globalization (an enormous and argumentatively rich topic) and offered his own well-supported proposal that the cafeterias at the three separate campuses of St. Louis Community College (student population numbering well over 20,000) should change their coffee-buying habits and switch exclusively to fair-trade organic coffee because it makes sense ethically, environmentally, and economically. Having found another community college, Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute (TVI), that had switched to only serving fair-trade coffee, having interviewed the food-service director from TVI, and having also solicited information from a spokesperson from a local fair-trade coffee supplier, Beau argued his case.

Showing the success story of the campus that had switched to fair-trade coffee was quite easy; as Beau shows by analogy, such a switch also has strong economic benefits if done correctly:

Within a matter of weeks, students at TVI, a community college with a student population of over 20,000, worked along with their food-service director and food-service provider Sodexo to successfully incorporate fair-trade coffee into their cafeterias. Sodexo, who had previously provided the school with Starbucks coffee, agreed to begin providing coffee from an Albuquerque-based supplier, Red Rock Roasters. By switching to Red Rock Roasters, TVI managed to cut its coffee cost by one-third. Instead of paying \$9 per pound for traditional Starbucks coffee, TVI is now paying \$6 per pound for the local roaster to provide fair-trade coffee (Adams).

As Beau argued, St. Louis Community College could also “see similar profits,” and he provided the name of a St. Louis–based coffee supplier who could provide a “competitive price.”

But profit was not the sole factor. Other important reasons for switching to fair-trade coffee consumption on campus were the ethical stance that workers should receive honest pay for honest work and, as another positive outcome, lessening the use of pesticides and herbicides, which has clear environmental benefits. Beau relates these ethical and emotional appeals that he finds important:

Most importantly, however, STLCC should provide fair-trade coffee because it is the right thing to do. As a student at Meramec, I wholeheartedly believe in the underlying philosophy of this institution: “St. Louis Community College recognizes the dignity and worth of all human beings.” Because the fair-trade network, like STLCC, recognizes the dignity and worth of all human beings and strives to preserve this in an industry where dishonesty and decadence run rampant, I feel obliged to support it and all it stands for. If one institution can stand firm in defense of its noble values, we must stand firm in defense of ours. We have the opportunity, and responsibility, to help improve the lives of coffee farmers and the environment. We have the opportunity to extend them some dignity, something they have been denied for far too long. The fair-trade network stands firm in defense of its noble values. I would like to propose that we do the same.

Drawing from these widely disseminated values of STLCC, Beau argued about a global problem and how we as administrators, teachers, and students can address the issue locally. I hope the food service directors and presidents on our three disparate campuses will take his advice.

Like Beau, John, a student in one of my College Composition 1 sections, drew from a local concern, in his case one of St. Louisians’ seasonal obsessions, baseball. John, using the same format of the cover letter plus argument paper, presented his writing to the head of security of the St. Louis Cardinals and the mayor’s office. As John relates here in his cover letter, he wants the security issues addressed at Busch Stadium because it *still* could be quite easy to bring in all kinds of weapons. He introduces this concern in his cover letter:

It is clear to me that one of the main goals of the Cardinals franchise is to make fans feel safe and to make sure that everything runs smoothly. I also realize that the cost of heightened protection is inconvenient. Nevertheless, valid security is always worth the hassle. I would like a chance to influence you to reinforce the safety of Busch Stadium premises before disaster strikes. Though no major threat has breached the current security so far, I believe that determined individuals would have no trouble with sneaking weapons inside the stadium in bags or clothing.

Although one could argue that John might emulate the current disaster and “war on terror” rhetoric we hear and read on a regular basis, he provided a number of personal examples, strong reflection, and plausible scenarios in his position essay.

He thoroughly underscores the problem that security is still quite lax. Using his own family's experiences from years of going to Cardinals games, and recent events like the president's visit ("When President Bush threw out the first pitch during a 2004 season game, there were metal detector wands, and the guards made sure to frisk every fan that entered the stadium. Security should face every game as if the President were there."), John argued for more comprehensive and

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stringent security standards like those of the Tampa Bay Sports Authority, the agency in charge of security at Raymond James Stadium. Using traditional research methods to compare security standards at numerous stadiums, capitalizing on a topic he is quite familiar with—baseball games at Busch Stadium—and writing passionately about an issue that weighs on his mind every baseball season, John wrote an argument not only for the pur-

poses of his composition class but also for the greater good of the St. Louis community.

Like John, Sarah, a student who was part of my Honor College Composition 1 course in Fall 2003, wrote a similar cover letter plus a traditional position paper, but she addressed hers to institutions she hadn't bothered to reflect all that much about for three or four years, her junior and senior high schools. By presenting her findings about the health-related effects of fast-food consumption, the nutritional bankruptcy of fast food, how this type of lunch fare affects younger people's sense of portion size, the "difficult—but very real—role of schools as substitute parents," and the Catch-22 quality of using profits from this merchandise to pay for various school necessities, Sarah argued that her school district needs to seriously consider ways to reinforce better food choices at lunchtime. She sums up the problem quite effectively in the latter part of her essay:

Fast foods are damaging to students' health, they promote lifelong eating habits, they send mixed messages that contradict what students are taught about nutrition, and they take advantage of students as a captive audience to their advertisements in blatant anticipation of making these students lifetime consumers. No matter how much money schools earn by selling fast foods, it will never be worthwhile or in the students' best long-term interest. Money doesn't equal health anymore than it equals happiness. Selling fast foods in schools is a short-term solution that will prove disastrous in the long run, not only for individual schoolchildren, but also for the whole country.

As Sarah also related in her cover letter, she merely hopes dialogue will take place. She wants the executive director of administrative services of her old school district to consider different options, such as having a closed lunch hour that would serve healthy foods that students like. She contends, "Most kids will eat healthier alternatives, if they are ones kids like. To discover these, schools could send out a

survey or conduct taste tests. At the very least these measures would demonstrate a consideration for both students' health and their palates that I believe students would find more respectful than being indulged in foods that many realize are not good for them."

As Beau's, John's, and Sarah's examples exhibit, students, if given the opportunity, are willing to take chances, they are willing to question and investigate problems that have affected them or issues they are concerned with, and they are willing to present their work to a wider audience than just the composition instructor. In contrast to how our national corporate media get Americans to think about citizenship as a once-every-four-years charge, these writing projects reinforce that being a critical citizen is a daily, community-based charge. Research paper assignments that help bridge the gap between the classroom and an outside audience such as these exemplify how students and teachers can work toward change at the local level, mimicking the more recent environmental mantra of "Think locally, act locally." Rather than complaining about problems, students can work toward creating change by becoming active citizens in the communities in which they reside, whether they are addressing a campus policy, a neighborhood problem, a citywide issue, or a statewide policy. Students can pull from their experiences to attempt to create change through their writing, making their voices heard. Although this type of writing assignment is probably not all that "new," the writing project reflects our core values, reaffirming composition-rhetoric's foundation laid by classical rhetoric and the educational philosophy of John Dewey.

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### **The Tacit Traditions of Classical Rhetoric and John Dewey**

As previously stated, my goal is not only to help students craft strong argumentative essays and persuasive cover letters that connect to an outside audience, but I also want my classroom to attempt to live up to the ideal of student-citizens being ethical and active participants in public life, mimicking the focus of classical rhetoric passed down from Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (the mantra of the "good man speaking well"). Of course, the democracies of ancient Greece and Rome were certainly quite selective about who were deemed citizens, but nonetheless the primary instruction in rhetoric was to train citizens who were able to persuade eloquently in deliberative, judicial, or epideictic speech. One of the main aims of ancient rhetorical instruction was to create well-spoken citizens who were able to reason and deliberate on problems or issues that might arise within their communities. As S. Michael Halloran relates in "Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse," "As an art of effective communication, then, the tradition of classical rhetoric gives primary emphasis to communica-

tion on public problems, problems that arise from our life in political communities” (246). The methods of service-learning and civic engagement appropriately reflect this classical tradition by once again interweaving rhetorical activity and civic life.

The community-based argumentative writing project I detailed focuses my college-level composition courses on showing students that knowing how to write effectively can make a tremendous impact on themselves and on the communities to which they belong, reinforcing a sense of the ancient Greek “rhetorical consciousness” that James Murphy and Richard Katula describe as a “world of discourse” where a citizen knew his “very future often depended on his ability to speak and write persuasively” (22). Although research essays addressing both an instructor and outside readers do not reflect the high drama of the Athenian courtroom or agora, civic-engagement initiatives are reinvigorating composition classrooms and the political life of many campuses.

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Through these civic-engagement measures and through our own public intellectualism, we can use rhetorical instruction to create local change. We can reclaim rhetoric’s civic importance and relevance.

In addition to the ancient rhetorical tradition that has been discussed and examined many, many times before this article, this movement of focusing on local

issues can also be traced to the educator John Dewey, someone who saw education as a way to create a true working democracy, similar to the way some envision college composition as an opportunity for students to become active citizens through applying their rhetorical skills *within* and *beyond* the classroom. Appropriately, most people associate Dewey with progressive education and philosophical pragmatism. Dewey, like many educators of the progressive tradition, wanted to align American education with the demands of a full participatory democracy. As Joan Rosen relates, Dewey and the composition theorists who draw from his philosophy believe that having a curriculum based on problem solving, critical thinking, and personal experience is crucial to having a fully functioning democratic society (70).

In this view, students develop fundamental skills that will help them in the future as individuals and critical citizens. This movement toward greater civic engagement in our classrooms shows that many instructors, as Rosen states, want students to be “perceptive human beings who can engage in reflective habits of mind, learn to express themselves with confidence, and believe that what they have thought and expressed is of value to themselves and to others [. . .]” (77). And those goals are precisely what I feel is beneficial about the methods of civic engagement for college composition. These initiatives promote students’ working on problems or concerns that are important to them, ones that they can even present to an

outside audience who may be able to address the issue, thereby showing students that writing is not some isolated academic exercise. Through civic-engagement activities, writing can be a means to address problems happening in their neighborhoods, their cities, and their states, which reinforces their role as active citizens.

These community-based methods of writing have been used in the past, and they connect to the Deweyan ideal of the critical student-citizen—the belief that education must not only develop students who will be assets in their chosen professions, but also develop alert citizens who work for the common good at the grassroots level. As Mara Holt remarks in “Dewey and the ‘Cult of Efficiency,’” Dewey perceived education as a tool for proper citizenship: “Dewey wanted to harness the potential of education to provide citizens the skills, knowledge, and habits they needed to govern themselves: both to have control over their lives and to help revitalize their society” (75).

### **Possibilities and Pragmatism**

Drawing from these classical and progressive traditions, instructors can use writing assignments that provide fruitful chances for students to write documents that address concerns not only to the collective of the composition classroom but also to an outside audience who may be able to create change. Such assignments as the one I have detailed attempt to show students that applied rhetoric can make a difference, and these methods, in turn, can reorient our classrooms toward more civic rhetoric. Through the act of writing, students can practice critical inquiry about their neighborhoods, campuses, cities, states, or the nation. And ideally their rhetorical action can foster revitalization.

Through this process of researching and addressing local or community concerns, writers can become engaged in the complexities of the local. By capitalizing on the tacit tradition of addressing community issues, civic-engagement initiatives can motivate students to actively research and think through the thorny nuances of a problem, which in turn can catalyze strong writing that exemplifies care and hard work. As mentioned previously, I believe most of this movement for civic engagement or rhetorical democracy is old ideas in new textbooks. However, those old ideas are quite helpful and quite powerful. Civic-engagement can foster strong writing, and the rhetorical practice, to use a phrase from one of my students, can be “rhetoric that gets things done.”

Student writing can address pragmatic and civic concerns—the research paper can be an act of citizenship. 

### **Notes**

1. Connors’s profound work clearly shows the power of textbooks to dictate practice in college composition. In particular, “Handbooks: History of a Genre,” “Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline,” “Grammar in American College Composition: An Historical Overview,” and “Personal Writing Assign-

ments” exhibit how not much has changed since the mid- to late nineteenth century.

2. To list the breadth of work in regard to service-learning composition would be a large task, but Thomas Deans’s *Writing Partnerships* and Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters’s *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition* are excellent places to start.

3. In his monograph Owens provides a methodology for organizing a composition course around the themes of place, work, and future. As he relates, his intent “is to create a context where students, regardless of their academic interests, explore concerns shared by most of them, and where they do so in a manner that connects their thinking to a variety of cross-disciplinary texts” (173–74).

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