

Environmental Flux and Locally Focused College Writing

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Abstract: This article reviews insights from place-based education and ecological models of writing to show how these theories can work together to shape locally focused composition pedagogies. From place-based education, the researcher takes an emphasis on physical specificity, and from ecological models of writing, the researcher takes an emphasis on discursive constructions of places. Both orientations to place are applied to an undergraduate professional writing class in Houston, an environment that illustrates vividly how unique physical changes interact with competing discourses in the present moment. The researcher describes a revision to a major writing assignment and discusses a need for assessment criteria that allow instructors to see the value of place-based and ecological models of writing.

Writing assignments on local issues are an emerging staple of many college composition courses now that instructors recognize the situatedness of language use. With various degrees of awareness, instructors influenced by composition's 1980s-90s social turn and 2000s local turn have invigorated their classes by drawing from place-based education and ecological models of writing, to say nothing of overlapping insights gleaned from cultural geography and critical regionalism. The practical and theoretical outcomes have been profound, as evidenced by an explosion of twenty-first century research investigating the complex relationship of writing to place (e.g., Gruenewald and Smith; Weisser and Dobrin, *Ecocomposition*; Keller and Weisser; Reynolds; McComiskey and Ryan; Rice, "Unframing"). However, the rise of this research, and with it composition textbooks and readers that urge students to use their surroundings to inform their writing and research (e.g., Silverman and Rader; Mathieu et al.; Collins), creates space for new questions. One such question concerns how various conceptions of the relationship between writing and place match and how the conceptions differ—a question about theoretical accuracy. Once this is clear, we may consider another, more provocative question: what might our students gain if we apply multiple strands from this research to our composition pedagogies?

Today, one of the main differences among competing conceptions of writing and place concerns our treatment of place—as an empirical reality? A social construct? In her book *Geographies of Writing*, Nedra Reynolds bypasses a single, constricting definition of place by using postmodern geographer Edward Soja's explanation of *Firstspace* (physical space), *Secondspace* (perceived space), and *Thirdspace* (a discursively sophisticated breakdown of the binaries posed by First and Secondspace); and her application of Soja's theory offers one way to think about place on different levels simultaneously. But often, scholars of writing and place work from other disciplinary and theoretical traditions. Many scholars value writing about visible, tangible places—part of *place-based education*, a movement popular in K-12 education and at certain National Writing Project sites. David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith describe place-based education as "introduc[ing] [students] to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities," thereby prioritizing community building and maintenance (Gruenewald and Smith xvi). Meanwhile, many scholars of

college student writing adopt ecological models of writing that conceptualize place partly through communication networks or systems that complicate traditional notions of the local. The most well-known form of the latter approach is ecocomposition, which Christian R. Weisser and Sidney I. Dobrin call “an area of study which...places ecological thinking and composition in dialogue in order to both consider the ecological properties of written discourse *and* the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and natures are *discursively* affected” (“Breaking” 2, my emphasis). Place-based writing and ecological models of writing are not opposites, but they differ in their emphases and applications, with college-focused ecological models more readily embracing discursively constructed relations in addition to physical locations.

Here I want to step in because I see these and related orientations to place growing farther apart, each of them receiving attention in separate books and disciplines. I argue that college composition students stand to improve their writing and research about local topics if the students build from both place-based writing and ecological models of writing. As I shall show, in order for students to address the complexity of the area where I teach, a city whose only reliable feature is physical and discursive flux, students need writing and research occasions that focus attention in two directions at once: on the unique physical transformations surrounding the students and on the discourse-based interests and ideologies that affect and are affected by those transformations. But first, a fuller comparison is needed to show the gap between place-based education and ecological models of writing.

In the field of Rhetoric and Composition, interest in writing ecologies is directing attention to increasingly elaborate and elusive networks of communication (Rice, “Unframing”; Rice, “From Architectonic”; Dobrin). Thomas Hothem shares his ecocomposition-informed pedagogy when he discusses a course he teaches on writing suburbia, a course which begins with analyses of concrete details of suburban life, but which then places suburbs into historical, mass-mediated, and other contexts (35). In his course, the rise of a normative physical phenomenon (suburban sprawl) prompts students to analyze multiple discourses. This tendency to treat physical specificity as a gateway to more abstract analyses characterizes other ecocomposition work too, such as Bonnie D. Devet’s ecocompositionist study of writing centers. For Devet, “constantly try[ing] to understand [writing centers’] places in their schools and in composition studies as a whole” means analyzing discourse communities, genre, and voice as these discursive factors support relationships that support writing center work.

Additionally, at the rhetoric end of Rhetoric and Composition, *regional rhetoric* is supplementing an ecological perspective on writing (Rice, “From Architectonic”). In her introduction to a 2012 special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Jenny Rice describes *region* as a “rhetorical interface” (204), a disruptor of clear distinctions between region and nation (206), de-territorialized “networks in a constant flux” (208), and strategic cultivations of identity (210). She and the *RSQ* issue’s other contributors draw from Douglas Reichert Powell’s description of region “as a relational term” rather than a physical site—that is, region as “a larger network of sites” (Powell 4). Rice and her fellow contributors do acknowledge that materiality (e.g., soil and food) shapes and is shaped by strategic language moves that establish new relationships, but here too the special issue’s emphasis remains on the social and the discursive: Kansas as constructed through newspapers with competing agendas (Tell), *América* as inspired by a certain soil but advocated through poetic language that revises national identities (Olson), Hawaiian identity as invoked through song (Clark), and protest movements as united through discourse across locations (Greene and Kuswa). In the special issue’s conclusion, Andrew Wood writes, “Regions are shaped by discourse; their ephemeral markers of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ ‘us’ and ‘them,’ demand perpetual deliberation, interrogation, adjudication, and restoration” (290). After then discussing the social construction of Silicon Valley, he adds, “A place is

a fact; a region is a choice, and not necessarily one made by its inhabitants” (Wood 290). I take from Wood, as from Rice, a persuasive call to study the transience of discourse-based associations, which can be wielded by a society’s empowered and disempowered populations alike. Yet what place-based theorists would still want to see unpacked is the role of materiality, particularly human-made constructs, in *facilitating* or *limiting* strategic recreations of places. Generally, in ecological models of writing, I see rhetoricians’ eagerness to study alphabetic texts as leading to missed opportunities for research and teaching.

A similar issue of emphasis, but in reverse, applies to place-based education, which explores in rich detail the implications of creating or destroying physical human-made sites such as buildings, cemeteries, and parking lots. As Mellinee Lesley and Marian Matthews explain, place-based education gives students agency in “making and remaking their communities” (525). Like other place-based scholars, they encourage students to write about specific sites within communities, sites such as “restaurants, stores, museums, graveyards, courthouses, ponds, sidewalks, walls, rivers, fields, forests, grandparents’ homes, public parks, and schools” (Lesley and Matthews 524). Similar attention to physical sites, though with a clearer focus on activism, characterizes place-based education that involves both K-12 teachers and college teachers, as in Sarah Robbins and Mimi Dyer’s edited collection *Writing America: Classroom Literacy and Public Engagement*, which details the work of one National Writing Project site’s participants in advocating for specific uses of material sites in and around metropolitan Atlanta. Suburban developments were studied for their impact on students and others in a town or larger area (e.g., Martinez 29), and rural-to-suburban transformations in north Georgia counties prompted research and writing activities that promoted deeper understanding for residents who could then determine whether and how to speak up about how certain areas should be used (e.g., Corbett; Stewart; Templeton).

Research and writing of this kind assumes a still stronger activist dimension in the collection *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, edited by David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith. For example, here Elaine Senechal shares her story of working with a Boston charter high school’s students to sway the city public and government about a proposed biological lab that could pose health risks to nearby residents (99-100). In Senechal’s piece, as in many accounts of place-based education, writing is used in campaigns to influence the building or rebuilding of a neighborhood, town, county, or reservation in ways affecting resources available to residents; and the connection to material reality—museums, historical buildings, public transportation vehicles—remains conspicuous. However, despite its inspiring stories of challenging proposed developments and policies (e.g., Senechal) and despite its acknowledgement that flux characterizes community life (Lauter vii; Eidman-Aadahl 2), this body of work spends comparatively little time investigating changes unfolding now in discursive as well as physical environments, particularly in fast-growing urban areas where evolving sites and competing norms and identities can be a fact of life. For instance, when LeeAnn Lands, writing in Robbins and Dyer’s collection, briefly references the proposed “Northern Arc” that would bring metropolitan Atlanta’s interstate rings deeper into the city’s exurbs and rural areas (61), I see an opportunity for place-based educational approaches to analyze the rhetoric of this emerging idea, an opportunity that ecological models of writing would embrace.

These theoretical traditions can and should be used together in college writing classes. In the remainder of this essay, I illustrate my application of these ideas to the location where I teach, the booming, sprawling, diversifying Sunbelt city of Houston. Convenience aside, I use this location because, given its nearly unparalleled growth over the past few decades—growth which involves neighborhoods all the way to the city’s core—Houston is an exceptionally vivid case of an environment that demands attention to material particularity and to incessant transformations in

materiality, terminology, and ideology. The salience of this environment's changes allows us to consider ways that other environments deserve similar kinds of attention given the fact of renovations, deterioration, land sales, transfers in ownership, and the like. To show Houston's role in influencing the writing assignments that I used, I review publicly circulating descriptions of the city in recent years, noting the ubiquity of the city's physical, ideological, and discursive changes. Then I describe small but consequential alterations I made between Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 to writing assignments in my Business and Professional Writing classes, which were open to any students at my institution who had completed first-year composition. (This course functioned as an advanced composition course that prepared undergraduate students to write for many post-college work environments.) Finally, with the help of student surveys, I argue that my revisions to the writing assignments encourage us to revisit what we usually value about student writing. My assignments' focus on nuanced, multi-layered engagements with one's surroundings offers a starting point for assessments that recognize contributions from place-based and ecological models of writing.

Houston's Changes and Pedagogical Potential

In Houston, students have no choice but to confront shifting social, symbolic, and physical terrain on a daily basis. Owing partly to the city's lack of zoning laws, the city's neighborhoods densify, gentrify, deteriorate, change functions, and assume new roles within the larger physical, social, and semiotic domains. As one *New York Times* journalist put it, "developers [in Houston] can, in theory, build virtually anything, anywhere in the city" (Hudgins). So what it means and looks like to inhabit each city neighborhood evolves given new and frequently unpredictable construction and given the work of different groups to define and control the area. As a result of the temporariness of physical structures and the ambiguity of spatial designations, boundaries blur between urban centers and suburbs, such that the meaning, function, and aesthetics of the city's suburbs complicate descriptions of suburbs found in ecocomposition or place-based writing alone (see Corbett; Hothem). The weaving of suburban-inspired lots and buildings throughout the city "fold[s] together" (Amin qtd. in Rice, "From Architectonics" 206) these developments with outer-ring suburbs in other states, yet the influence of suburban construction and lifestyles in this Houston also warrants attention for its non-generalizable features.

Keeping pace with the physical and discourse-based ideological changes in the city are changes in the city's population itself as great migrations of a twenty-first-century variety attract new inhabitants from California, New York, and the Midwest, as well as from other countries. The 2010 U.S. Census reports that metropolitan Houston grew by 26.1 percent between 2000 and 2010, a percentage that greatly surpasses the growth of most other U.S. metropolitan areas. Concerning ethnicity, the changes are equally striking: the City of Houston reports that White non-Hispanic residents decreased from 52.3 percent of the city's 1980 population to 25.6 percent of the city's 2010 population. Some of these changes in population and culture, and with them changes in prominent stores and restaurants, are evident in the fact of the city's just-designated "Mahatma Gandhi District" in the west, near a Chinatown that relocated recently to accommodate larger numbers of residents from China and Southeast Asia. Similarly, in the eastern part of Houston, competing cultural influences appear in an under-construction light-rail line whose stops bear multiple names separated by slashes. Such examples remind us of the extent to which social changes can interact with discursive and physical changes—and not only historically but also in the present and the foreseeable future. With more and different kinds of people, opportunities arise for new infrastructure, texts, and spatial identities.

One outcome of these changes is that what once counted as "normal" here, in transportation, politics, religion, housing, and aesthetics, continues to transform. Unwittingly evoking Gloria Anzaldúa's

borderland theory and Soja's Thirdspace, one Hurricane Katrina evacuee who relocated to Houston where she opened a New Orleans-themed restaurant explained, "The city [Houston] is the music, the people and the food.... When you take a large group and you sprinkle them across a big city like a spicy gumbo, you're going to get a unique recipe" (Reed qtd. in Patterson).^[1] [\[#note1\]](#)

Transformations beyond the hurricane-induced also show the area's social reorganization. For instance, by 2010, the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau started the website My Gay Houston, capitalizing on the 2009 mayoral election of out-lesbian bookstore owner Annise Parker. For many GLBT-identified people, Parker's election put Houston, the largest city in one of the most politically conservative states in the country, on the GLBT map (Harvey). In 2011, Houston's religious diversity surfaced nationally, and, to many outsiders, unexpectedly given the city's historical association with megachurches. Texas Governor Rick Perry chose the Houston Texans' football stadium, adjacent to the famous Astrodome, as the site from which to lead his highly publicized "Day of Prayer" for America. As visible as the event itself was an outcry that the event prompted from members of local non-evangelical religious groups that saw the Day of Prayer as exclusionary (Houston Clergy Council). Also, as the city's population has grown and diversified, rapid gentrification has challenged local memory of Black inner-city communities. In one study, archaeologist Carol McDavid traced the radical transformation of Freedman's Town, an inner-city neighborhood settled by emancipated slaves, to a largely white upper-middle-class community. And local cultural websites and blogs stay abuzz about changes in trends and tastes, particularly when the changes link Houston to social events in New York City or Los Angeles. These are just a few of the social changes that have unfolded recently in and beyond printed texts.

While ecologically informed composition pedagogies may expose students to "multiple mundane documents, interpersonal networks, historical influences, and rhetorical moves and countermoves"(Rivers and Weber 191)—in short, to texts that permeate and influence daily life—and may prepare students to circulate related texts of their own beyond classroom confines (Rivers and Weber 210), the pace of change in Houston's significations and physical structures necessitates writing that is shaped by the expectation of mutability. Physical changes in Houston characterize most if not all parts of the city, with attendant ideological and discursive changes playing out as well. To return to the Freedman's Town example, not only is gentrification transforming the neighborhood's social demographics, but it has removed, and is still removing, many of the area's historical structures to allow for new brick and stucco townhouses. Currently, nineteenth-century buildings that once occupied Freedman's Town lie in downtown's Sam Houston Park a few miles away, the park serving as a spatially acontextualized showpiece for the city's Heritage Society. This relocation of historical structures could suggest that the historic buildings of Freedman's Town prove ill-suited to new inhabitants, or that Freedman's Town's few historic buildings prove ill-suited to the plans of developers and real estate companies that profit from refashioning the neighborhood.

In 2011-2012, other physical transformations with social and discursive ramifications included the construction of aboveground light rail lines, the city's soccer stadium, and new public university buildings, as well as redevelopment of the city's bayous. Major changes to the city's south side appeared imminent given a spirited local debate about the future of the abandoned Astrodome and an adjacent lot that was once occupied by the amusement park Six Flags AstroWorld. One local journalist explains, "The property [once occupied by Six Flags AstroWorld] might be held for three to five years as an investment, or land parcels might be sold piece by piece." She adds that a major meeting about the area will soon occur among real estate insiders (Dawson). Given the size of this land and its location along rail lines, interstates, and one of the largest groups of medical facilities in the world, deliberations about this area's future testify to how Houston's physical composition is a source of competition among people who seek to construct and benefit from it. In addition to the

construction and planning of the south side, construction of a stadium for the city's Houston Dynamos soccer team is giving a central structure to east downtown, increasingly called EaDo, and to the neighboring Warehouse District. This addition stands to bring not just more business and residential development to the area (thus, more density, less automobile dependence), but also a greater Hispanic presence given the disproportionately large percentage of Hispanic ticket buyers (Lopez). Here the addition of a sports stadium stands to alter commercial and residential options as well as the ethnic groups that frequent the area. Similarly, just west of downtown, city planners are advancing ideas to transform Buffalo Bayou, now lined by cement, into a green space comparable to New York City's Central Park (Shauk). City planners hope to "resculpt" the bayou proper to "restore a more natural meandering path that was scraped away during a 1950s flood control project" (Hagstette cited in Shauk). In this case, planners are investigating a reversal to the city's desires of yesteryears now that a "natural" look and feel of the bayou is preferred.

The prevalence of physical flux throughout Houston reinforces a need for local writing assignments that take seriously place-based education's concern for material sites and resources, for physical changes in the city interact in unique ways with larger social and ideological forces. Students cannot assume that because they studied patterns of development that characterize other cities, they know how to foresee and write about physical changes in Houston. At the same time, the clashing and overlapping of place names and social codes in Houston—an ecology of discourses—supports a case for analyzing the social construction of location, ways that language facilitates rhetorical identifications. Thus, from 2011 to 2012, I saw that if my students wanted to understand and influence their surroundings through writing, the students needed practice writing about non-generalizable issues facing specific physical sites and practice situating those site-based engagements in relation to "the *effects and concatenations* of...local ecologies" (Rice, "Unframing"²², her emphasis). In other words, students needed to explore the interaction between site-specific issues and trans-site interests and discourses. Consider, for instance, the challenges of writing about the following:

- North of downtown: construction of a light rail extension, a source of fiery, slogan-laden debates about transportation diversity in this oil industry city
- South of downtown: a motley collection of blocks that city planners recently began to recognize as Midtown, though it assumes other identities for long-term residents; here again interests converge, and construction is frequent
- Northwest of downtown: an area that some inhabitants increasingly call an arts district (in street banners, for instance), this in contrast to the area's industrial uses and its attractiveness to the homeless

Beyond the bulldozers and real estate signs, different groups vie to make Houston into a place of many conflicting identities. By 2012, I realized that if I expected my students to produce writing that would be heard and heeded in this surround, I would need to complicate the writing assignments used in my past classes.

Changes to an Undergraduate Writing Class's Assignments

The pedagogical revisions that I discuss here can be adapted to analysis assignments for many undergraduate writing courses. One reason I focus on my Business and Professional Writing classes is that I was teaching these undergraduate writing classes when I realized the potential of combining strands of place-based education and ecological models in my own pedagogy. Also, Business and Professional Writing, having not been offered in years at my institution, appealed powerfully to

students and administrators alike, speaking to the interests of job seekers and job placement-attentive supervisors. It was a course that was ripe for updates.

Both my fall 2011 and spring 2012 versions of Business and Professional Writing covered writing genres common in many workplace settings, including memos, letters, reports, and proposals. In both versions, I tempered the emphasis on writing forms by localizing the classes' assignments. Using the textbook *Writing That Works* (Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred 2010), the students and I kept an eye on how writing genres, arguments, organization options, and stylistic choices correspond to audiences and needs. For the major writing assignments in both courses, the students wrote hypothetical pieces to or for actual groups in metropolitan Houston. Thus, the revisions I made to my spring 2012 Business and Professional Writing class focused not on textbooks or writing genres, but on the role of change—physically specific and discursively resonant—in the rhetorical situations described by my assignments.

My revisions to the course's memo assignment, given in the first few weeks of the semester, illustrate the significance of the writing occasion constructed by the assignment. In my fall 2011 class, I had asked students to imagine that they serve on a transportation improvement committee overseen by the city government, and I had asked the students to write a memo to update other committee members about research completed on a specific transportation issue. For my spring 2012 class, I developed a more complex scenario that centralized in-process changes in physical workspace and in attendant communication possibilities. I asked students to imagine that they led an on-campus student organization whose members mentored prospective college students. Normally, I explained, this student organization occupied an office in the building that houses the university's English Department. With this context in mind, the students were to write a memo to the organization's mentors announcing a physical relocation of the group's offices and suggesting strategies for adapting to this move. This version of the assignment, while adhering to the memo genre's role of updating members of an organization, made the workplace's physical space a topic for discussion in relation to the organization's future work. Moreover, this added layer of mutability reflected the campus environment my students experienced given the physical transformations all around us: the construction of a new student center (and a related re-centering of students' congregating areas), plans to demolish the football stadium and build a larger one funded partly by increased student fees, the transformation of surface parking lots to more costly multilayered parking decks, renovations to the student art gallery, and multiple construction projects related to science and business buildings. For many of my students, simply attending classes and campus events meant bypassing construction zones and navigating relocations. So, for the memo assignment, the challenge of conveying information to keep order amid a fluctuating work environment proved fitting even as it challenged students to consider makeshift locations for meetings and to think through new options for handling the organization's written and face-to-face communication.

Taking the factor of change further was my spring 2012 class's formal report assignment, which, completed in groups, was also the class's longest and most complex assignment. In my fall 2011 class, the assignment had asked students to suppose that a local business or organization was in the early stages of deciding whether to expand from its current location in metropolitan Houston to another part of the metro area. It had requested that the students pick an existing business or organization and an existing neighborhood and write a research-based formal report detailing what kind of fit, if any, appeared between the two. As a whole, my fall 2011 students produced detailed and (what looked to me like) personally meaningful reports citing local publications and using primary data. I received papers asserting that, yes, a fit was to be found, and papers announcing a partial fit;

and papers of each kind struck me as quite tidy, conclusive, the business's vision and clients accounted for, the new neighborhood's look and demographics analyzed.

That fall, the procession toward certainty and neatness wobbled, momentarily, when I spoke with a student who wanted to gather information about Houston's Warehouse District. The student identified himself as a resident of that area and expressed his disappointment at the Warehouse District's overall lack of visibility in local publications; consequently, he wondered how he could complete his task. I understood his point: Many times I too had noticed local magazines whose contributors so emphasized Montrose and The Heights (two prominent and gentrifying areas of west Houston) that the contributors overlooked other neighborhoods altogether. So, restricted by the number of available print sources, my student completed his part of the report by interviewing other residents of his district, much as secondary educator Traci Blanchard's students relied on interview data given a dearth of written records about their Atlanta-area topic—an adjustment that Blanchard calls “a shining example of authentic research” (106). My Warehouse District student's information about what it meant to live and work in this part of Houston thus came from interactions with other insiders, this information assuming a theme of independent artists struggling to resist surrounding corporatization. Although the student completed the assignment, his early question stayed with me. The Warehouse District, I learned from people I spoke with and from occasional articles, as well as from my student's report, was applied to a nebulous section of the city just northeast of downtown, in an area that had once served as an industrial center and loading zone for now-absent trains. To people who claimed to know it, or some version of it since the label “Warehouse District” was not unanimously accepted, the area was characterized by parking lots, homeless people, crime, a mix of ethnic groups, nearness to downtown, affordable housing, growing artistic communities, or the city's under-construction soccer stadium. Of the students I talked with who knew the Warehouse District, none could identify its borders.

Without concluding that the Warehouse District represents any one idea, I saw that students familiar with Houston could use it or other city neighborhoods as springboards to exploring the instability of physical sites and related ideologies and discourses. My newfound awareness echoed Derek Owens's explanation of an assignment for college students to write neighborhood histories. Owens observes that such assignments “give students a chance to recognize the fact that all environments *are in continual states of flux*, to see how their communities have evolved radically over several generations, and to begin to contemplate the ways in which those places will continue to change, for better or worse” (“Sustainable,” 32, my emphasis). His depiction of flux is worth developing further, I realized; only instead of tracking historical changes (a path well trodden in local pedagogical research), I wanted to see if students could examine in-process changes. Furthermore, I saw that the designation “The Warehouse District,” like the coming and going names of organizations and other neighborhoods, worked rhetorically to align or differentiate an area relative to other boundary markers. Terms, whether names or descriptions, could be used to support or deter changes in population and physicality.

What I did for my spring 2012 class's formal report assignment was present the assignment in terms of flux—the notion that physical, social, and discursive changes unfold continually and ubiquitously. In doing so, I suggested that people who write effective texts in professional situations are people who investigate and respond to now-occurring shifts at specific sites, people who realize that their documents circulate in an ecology that changes both with the tenor of local debates (Rivers and Weber) and with the physicality of structures that house and disperse people, encourage or discourage access, provide services, and encourage outlooks and behaviors. I bore in mind Derek Owens's

provocative question, “How do...spaces direct you, shape you, make assumptions for you?” (“Teaching” 365).

On my assignment sheet proper, I explained that before writing a formal report, students needed to gather detailed information about the following:

1. The current status of the organization’s/business’s work: ideal clients, typical customer base, interaction with surrounding community.
2. Another Houston-based neighborhood that is undergoing changes now: its demographics, its reputation, its on-the-horizon changes, its relationship to other neighborhoods, its (shifting?) role(s) in the metropolitan area.

And I added the following:

With research about the topics above, report on what kind of fit, if any, you see between the organization/business and the new neighborhood that you studied. *Remember that both organizations/businesses and neighborhoods change all the time. They grow. They redefine themselves. They serve new purposes. They lose residents and welcome new residents. They lose businesses. They embrace new businesses.* (emphasis in original)

Another important change I made to the formal report assignment was to bundle it with a supplemental sheet subtitled “The Fluidity of ‘Fit.’” Here I asked students to consider questions such as, “Where is your business/organization headed in its services? In its targeting of clients? In its work/mission that it establishes for itself?” And: “Where is the other neighborhood or district that you are eyeing...going? What sort of place is it becoming seen as? What are people beginning to associate with it and why? Based on what sources, what observable developments?” (emphasis in original). Then I clarified that although students were to determine whether a fit existed between an organization and another neighborhood, that determination could rest on current significations as well as on “information about where each of them [the organization and the neighborhood] is going.”^[2] [\[#note2\]](#) In effect, I was asking my students to take up lines of analysis best known to developers and other real estate insiders.

Initially students seemed perplexed. (Couldn’t they just follow the textbook’s rules for writing formal reports?) But they made strides once I explained the complexity of flux in terms of our university itself, which was experiencing major physical, social, and even discursive changes—the latter evident in the university’s new designation from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and in the university’s shift in sports conference affiliation.

So guided, students from my spring 2012 Business and Professional Writing class oriented their chosen business/organization and neighborhood to assumptions of mutability. With flux taken as their norm, the one constant in a shifting landscape, students analyzed local sites in a larger effort to tease out factors of purpose, interest, means, and audience from which no physical structure or ideology could claim exemption. For example, one student group wrote about a suburban scrapbooking business’s expansion possibility from a suburb northwest of Houston to a high-growth area in the city, noting major developments in this part of Houston such as high-rise hospitals and hotels and specifically the rise of crafts stores, complete with an analysis of the area’s consumer demands and habits. These students developed a sense of their chosen neighborhood as a conjunction of material and ideological forces that ever-moving people develop into what they value; the students showed this section of Houston to be transitioning to a new artistic identity and encountering related challenges amid shrinking business space and higher rents. A second student group wrote about one Warehouse

District performance venue possibly expanding into a location at the border of two west-side neighborhoods, one of these neighborhoods currently housing numerous commercial businesses and upscale townhouses and condos, the other neighborhood catering primarily to alternative cultural tastes. The challenge that these students accepted by reflecting on clienteles and neighborhood reputations in different parts of the city allowed the students to see neighborhoods in terms of perceptions, demands, and interests held by people who move into them, people who may well keep moving depending on available physical structures and discursive identities found there and the structures and identities visible on the horizon. The availability of certain building types and purposes reinforced and perhaps propelled such changes, the students saw. A third student group wrote about a health food store's possible expansion from an increasingly liberal enclave within the city to a distant suburb that had just begun to make quality-of-life improvements like walking paths and bicycle lanes. These students cited a locally bemoaned study that showed Houston to be America's fattest city and used the study to highlight how some people in the distant suburb were combatting the reputation that the study supported. This recognition of the relationship between mass-mediated identities and changing physical structures (non-automotive transportation routes) let the students analyze the suburb that they studied in terms of its potential to support changes.

Beyond suggesting that site-specific knowledge matters when writing about infrastructure, populations, and desires (a point made compellingly by place-based education research as a whole), my spring 2012 formal report assignment picked up where place-based compositionists Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh leave their discussion of deep mapping in Lincoln, Nebraska: with the potential of language to create new spatial meanings and identities. Brooke and McIntosh conclude by acknowledging "the force of people's words" in maintaining and transforming places (147). In an urban context, Richard Marback writes, "Cities may not speak for themselves, but in speaking for cities we do indeed transform them" (143). My students, while adhering to textbook-enforced genre prescriptions and the constraints of a professional writing course's scope, situated their ideas for an organization's possible expansion into another part of the metropolitan area, and in so doing, they worked to fit or revise existing discourses between an organization and a new neighborhood. About their organization, the students asked, what does the organization say it does? What are the terms usually associated with it? About the new neighborhood, the students asked, how is the neighborhood's identity described? How might that identity be revised? For instance, the students who wrote about a scrapbooking business's possible expansion to a new part of the city examined the new area's reputation and explored language moves capable of aligning a *currently suburban* scrapbooking store to the assemblage of people and stores coming to the rapidly growing urban-with-suburban-undertones area of Houston. The students considered: to what extent, in this moment, can scrapbooks be associated with crafts like pottery, jewelry, and quilts that sell well in this new section of the city? What would it take to make scrapbooking appeal to supporters of other kinds of art? This student group had to broaden an in-town neighborhood's developing reputation and expand common definitions of *craft*. The students were writing about an area's businesses and available space but also testing possibilities for revising the area's discourses.

Deciding What to Value About Locally Focused Writing

One unresolved aspect of assignments like my spring 2012 formal report is to what extent they produce "better" student writing. If by "better" we mean clearer writing, more grammatically correct writing, or other criteria common to rubrics, then we need targeted assessment procedures to compare students' writing before and after completing the assignments; more widespread future applications of place-based and ecological models of writing might collect findings from such assessments. However, some important *effects* of my formal report assignment are visible in my spring 2012 Business and

Professional Writing students' written responses to a survey that I administered after teaching the class. The survey, which received approval from my university's institutional review board, asked students what they found most helpful and challenging about the formal report assignment, how closely this assignment compared to other writing completed by the students, what effect the assignment had on the students, and how greatly the assignment prepared the students to handle other writing in and beyond the class. Although the survey reached my former students after most of them had graduated and left the university, a couple of students responded at length.

To a question about whether the students had ever considered the factors of physical and discursive mutability described in the supplemental sheet to the formal report assignment, one student wrote,

No, I have never come across an assignment that had asked me to consider the factors mentioned in the supplement. I have had writing assignments in the past, however, that have asked for me to brainstorm, but in my opinion brainstorming and considering specific factors are two entirely different things. Brainstorming is similar to taking a road trip and not yet having chosen a destination, whereas the supplement was similar to having decided where to go and then working out how to get there.

This student describes the process of responding to a changing environment and organization as "working out how to get there," with "there" referring to the goal of the writing. For him, the assignment's supplemental information scaffolded his exploration of how to support and illustrate an argument for an organization's fit in a new neighborhood.

This point receives elaboration in the student's response to the question, "What effect, if any, did the supplement to the formal report assignment have on you?" The student explained,

It exposed me to [the] process that goes into creating an in-depth report. Before this project, my impression of reports was limited to reports being papers that regurgitated information in a listless way. In honesty, the supplement to the formal report took very much work. It was at first difficult to answer each question in the supplement without dissecting the business that we researched. Of course the most useful aspect of the supplement was the fact that it offered a platform for our team to more effectively work with one another. Our team could more adequately work together due to the objectives presented in the supplement: essentially answering the question, "Which direction are we going?" Overall the supplement I found most necessary [for] defining the group's plan and helping the group stick to it.

At least two noteworthy effects of the supplemental sheet appear in this answer. One is that the student connects the work of investigating a changing environment to collaborative learning: the supplement "served as a platform for our team to more effectively work with one another," as he put it. A second effect is that the supplemental sheet focused the student on the factor of workplace movement or change by drawing attention to the question "What direction are we going?"

Another student respondent, who had prior work experience in a professional setting, seconded the point about the supplemental sheet's help in guiding her research and writing. But this student had the most to say about the formal report assignment's connection to her past work. To the question of whether the supplemental sheet of the formal report assignment made this assignment similar to other writing she had done, the student wrote,

Yes, the company I was working with at the time dealt with international trade consulting. We helped local companies become national, national companies become international, and international companies become accepted into and successful in local communities. We had to phrase their mission statements and work processes in ways that local governments would accept them; they had to appear successful and beneficial to the communities. We also looked at neighborhoods to see if they were a good fit for a specific company; if we decided that a particular area was not a good fit, then we had to find another area that might be. I have to specify that I did not work directly on these writing pieces; I edited them. But because I had been exposed to it I vaguely knew what the project was looking for.

Although this student qualifies her role in producing professional writing by emphasizing the fact that (in the past) she merely edited the writing from her workplace, her comments indicate that the documents composed at her workplace transform company identities in relation to geographic and cultural identities. In such a setting, change appears a fact of life.

Given these student perspectives, any assessment to determine whether writing assignments like my spring 2012 formal report yield better student writing would need to rate the writing on the basis of students' collaboration and students' attention to physical, social, and discursive features of an environment. If assessors code students' writing with general categories like *content*, *organization*, and *surface language*, the assessors will likely overlook the value of writing assignments that situate rhetoric in changing places and organizations. Therefore, one outcome of assignments like my revised formal report is that they force us, as instructors, to look again at what we value currently and what we might value in our writing classes. Numeric data from my course evaluations from Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 supports the possibility that my revisions to assignments in my Business and Professional Writing class enhanced students' critical thinking skills. (Students' satisfaction with the critical thinking encouraged in the course rose by eighteen percentage points from 2011 to 2012.) More detailed assessments may help us unpack what students equate with critical thinking and may help us refine what categories like *content* and *logic* should mean for locally focused writing.

Similarly, my drawing from place-based education and ecological models of writing alerts us to what we might value from each tradition. As accounts of *place* multiply in composition theory and research, we find not "the" correct conception for our pedagogies, but, upon careful review of conceptual overlaps and distinctions, ways that different conceptions complement one another and help student writers integrate their ideas more fully into the constructed, multifaceted environments around them. We may advocate for place-based education, ecomposition, a "critical pedagogy of place" (Gruenewald 149), "regional rhetoric" (Rice, "From Architectonic" 203), "Thirdspace" (Soja; Grego and Thompson), "geographies of writing" (Reynolds), "place writing" (Sinor), and conceptual strands still to come. As I hope I have shown through my synthesis of two of these strands, we are just beginning to discover how to apply multiple theoretical and disciplinary traditions to writing assignments as we encourage our students to write the local.

Notes

1. Many contributors to the Houston-focused *Cite Magazine*, which explores the intersection of architecture and urbanism, allude to similar themes of social movement. ([Return to text.](#) [\[#note1_ref\]](#))
2. The fact that my revisions to a writing course were relatively small (additions to existing assignments, new explanations of places and organizations) gives instructors another alternative

to the daunting, perhaps even impossible, task of redesigning entire courses and curricula (Moe). ([Return to text. \[#note2_ref\]](#))

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