Place-based social action in the multimodal communication classroom: a qualitative study of an English 250 class

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Place-based social action in the multimodal communication classroom: a qualitative study of an English 250 class

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
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Abstract

Working from the assumption that the composition curriculum is an ideal place for communication assignments focused on public writing within a local place, I’ve created a qualitative research study to explore ways to involve first-year composition students in social action projects that 1) help students connect local problems with an understanding of broader, systemic causes, and that 2) ask students to engage in and critically reflect on their ability to effect change on their college campus or in their local community through small, local actions using multimodal communication strategies. This study adds to the conversation about alternatives to service-learning projects and explores ways to make social action accessible and relevant to first-year composition students.
1. Introduction

“What appears to be at stake at the present moment in history is the ability of future generations of Americans to think and act in ways that speak to age-old precepts of freedom and democracy. The task of developing a mode of citizenship education that speaks to this challenge appears awesome. But when one looks at the consequences of not meeting this challenge, there appears the possibility of a barbarism so dreadful that we can do nothing less than act as quickly and thoughtfully as possible. It is in the spirit of what is just, necessary, and possible that we will have to move forward to meet this challenge.”

~Henry Giroux, Critical Theory and Rationality in Citizen Education 359-60

I have a specific memory that tends to work its way into my consciousness at the beginning of every semester. On the first day of my undergraduate rhetorical theory course, the professor walked to the front of the room, picked up a piece of chalk, and scrawled the following on the board: Rhetoric is… “Write your answer on a piece of paper,” he said. Ripping up half sheets and sharing with our neighbors, we all gave it our best shot. Some wrote down Aristotle’s token definition. Some thumbed through their new textbooks. Those who had no clue trembled in their seats. After we all wrote our answers, the instructor collected the sheets and read each guess out loud. “Effective persuasion.” “Communicating with style.” “I don’t know. That’s why I’m here.” We laughed. “I would agree that most of your definitions touch on some part of what makes up the discipline of rhetoric. What I haven’t seen,” he said “is any mention of citizenship, democracy, or social action.” He turned to the board and finished off his sentence. Rhetoric is using effective communication to positively affect social consequence. He explained that, yes, rhetoric was about style, argumentation, and the study of discourse. But what makes rhetoric valuable is its power to make the world a better place.
As an instructor in a rhetorically based composition program, I’m finding myself working from this same classical tradition of preparing students to communicate on matters of civic importance in their public forums. Like many others in composition studies (Berlin, Herzberg, Heilker, Dobrin, Weisser, Flower), I believe the composition classroom is an ideal site for analyzing and acting on questions of oppressive constructs and social inequities, eventually understanding the responsibilities we have in our civic lives. Public writing, to me, is not simply the next best assignment to provide students with real rhetorical situations. It is also an answer to the pervasive social problems of apathy and helplessness that are running rampant in the United States today.

In a recent New York Times column titled “Changing the World,” Bob Herbert observes how, in the face of gargantuan problems like the economic downturn, the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the current climate crisis, many in the American public have become overwhelmed and withdrawn from civic involvement:

Americans have tended to watch with a remarkable (I think frightening) degree of passivity as crises of all sorts have gripped the country and sent millions of lives into tailspins. Where people once might have deluged their elected representatives with complaints, joined unions, resisted mass firings, confronted their employers with serious demands, marched for social justice and created brand new civic organizations to fight for the things they believed in, the tendency now is to assume that there is little or nothing ordinary individuals can do about the conditions that plague them.
Herbert goes on to argue that Americanism has now become synonymous with spectatorship, noting that, for many, watching the news is no different than “watching a baseball game.” He finds that “this passivity and sense of helplessness most likely stems from the refusal of so many Americans over the past few decades to acknowledge any sense of personal responsibility for the policies and choices that have led the country into such a dismal state of affairs.” Herbert suggests that we can fight back against this passivity by taking “small steps” to engage social problems on a local level in community groups or within the schools. Finding ways to help students take these small steps is the driving motivation in the design of my lessons and the focus of my study.

Teaching students to pursue active involvement in the civic concerns of their communities is not a new idea in composition studies, or in rhetoric for that matter. Many scholars in rhetoric and composition (Halloran 1982; Berlin 1988, 1996; Heilker 1997; Dobrin and Weisser 2001; Owens 2002) as well as scholars of critical pedagogy (Shor 1980; Smith 1994; Berlin 1996; Gruenewald, 2003) have sounded calls for reinstating an ethic of civic responsibility to rhetorically based composition programs. The common argument is as James Berlin so passionately states:

For a democracy to function...citizens must actively engage in public debate, applying reading and writing practices in the service of articulating their positions and their critiques of the positions of others. To have citizens who are unable to write and read for the public forum thus defeats the central purpose of the notion of democracy. (“Rhetorics” 109-10)

Some (Adler-Kassner 1997; Bacon 1997; Coogan 2006; Herzberg 1997; Scott 2006) have argued for the teaching of public writing assignments through service-learning
projects in their local communities. Critics of service-learning (Bickford and Reynolds 2003, Scott 2006, Schutz and Gere 1998) have argued both that current service-learning models provide only surface understanding of social problems and do little to address the systemic causes for these problems. Striving to get students involved in public service, some (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, Dobrin and Weisser 2001; Gorzelsky 2009; Lazere 2005; Weisser 2002) have suggested possible “activist” projects that involve students in direct action, though many of these pedagogical approaches have met with student resistance (Ball and Lai 2006; Smith 1997; Lazere 2005).

Working from the assumption that the composition curriculum is an ideal place for communication assignments focused on public writing within a local place, I’ve created a qualitative research study to explore ways to involve first-year composition students in social action projects that 1) help students connect local problems with an understanding of broader, systemic causes, and that 2) ask students to engage in and critically reflect on their ability to effect change on their college campus or in their local community through small, local actions using multimodal communication strategies. This study adds to the conversation about alternatives to service-learning projects and explores ways to make social action accessible and relevant to first-year composition students. The following research study focuses primarily on these questions:
• What are possible ways to teach social action projects that can function as alternatives to service-learning and activist-based lessons?
• To what extent can place-based social action projects allow students to see themselves as capable of social action in the future?

The structure of this thesis is summarized below with brief descriptions of chapter content and study methodology.

The first chapter, “Theoretical Foundations,” provides a background of composition’s discussions of public writing/service-learning pedagogy, critical pedagogy and agency, and place-conscious pedagogy. These three strands of scholarship and theory provide the conceptual framework and a foreshadowing of the openings in the literature for this study.

Within Chapter One, the first section, “Public Writing in First Year Composition,” is a condensed history of the major theoretical movements that have informed composition studies during the past twenty to thirty years. I discuss how the revival of the classical rhetorical tradition in composition studies (Berlin 1989, 1996; Halloran 1982, Weisser 2002) and an understanding of writing as a social process (Cooper 1986) has spurred the growth of public writing classrooms and service-learning composition pedagogies. Following the discussion of these developments, I review current practices in service-learning composition classrooms, discussing concerns some scholars have about the drawbacks to service-learning as a vehicle of teaching citizen literacy (Bacon 1997; Bickford and Reynolds 2003; Heilker 1996; Herzberg 1997; Scott 2007). In the next section of my theoretical framework, “Critical Pedagogy and Agency,” I review the critical pedagogy
tradition (Freire 1970; Berlin 1996) and discuss the necessity for composition classrooms to prepare citizens to participate in a democratic community and avoid the passivity Herbert describes. I then represent various voices in composition and adult development pedagogy (Ignelzi 2000; Smith 1994; Qualley 1997) who argue for specific classroom strategies to open up spaces of possibility for students to take agency in their communication. I conclude that section with a brief review of agency as it pertains to individuals within larger social structures (Cooper 2010; Geisler 2004; Giddens 1979, 1982, 1984; Herndl and Licona 2007; Miller 2007). My final section in the review of theoretical groundwork, “Place-Based Pedagogy,” is a brief representation of the value that place-based pedagogy can bring to the composition classroom (Dobrin and Weisser 2000; Gruenewald 2003; Ball and Lai 2006).

My second chapter, “Methods and Data Collection,” outlines the methods and data collection for my study of place-based action projects that I assigned to two sections of English 250 students in Fall 2009. I discuss my qualitative methods and my rationale for using a participatory action research design. Each data instrument is outlined as it coordinates with a brief description of the organization of the “Place-Based Action” semester assignment chronology.

Chapter Three, “Discussion: Results and Analysis,” provides data analysis in relation to the conceptual framework, focusing on themes that emerge from student responses in order to gauge the extent to which the projects I assigned answer my research questions.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Conclusion,” discusses the conclusions I gathered from this collection of semester-long feedback in relation to the study’s conceptual
framework. I provide implications and suggestions for further work on place-based actions and I offer some possibilities for this study’s transferability to other locations and scenarios.
2. Theoretical Foundations

This chapter outlines the theoretical groundwork that informs my study. The first section, “Public Writing in First-Year Composition,” provides a background of composition’s recent past and the resurrection of rhetoric’s emphasis on communicating in the public forum. In the second section, “Critical Pedagogy and Agency,” I review foundational work in critical pedagogy, its relationship to student agency, and discuss how agency has been understood in both composition and rhetorical studies scholarship. The final section of this chapter, “Place-Based Pedagogy” explores the core ideas behind place-focused composition curricula.

Public Writing in First-Year Composition

In recent years, there has been interest amongst some scholars in composition of reviving the classical rhetorical tradition of providing students with a writing education that includes focuses on civic involvement and communication in a public forum. Some in the field have understood public writing to be “letter to the editor” assignments or observations at the local city council (Dobrin and Weisser 110). Other versions of public writing have instructors advocating social justice issues in the classroom and involving students in hands-on activities, often in the form of service-learning exercises (Gorzelsky 2009). For a catchall definition, however, I’ll take my definition of public writing from Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser’s book, *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition*: “Public writing can be defined as any written discourse that attempts to address an issue of importance to any local, regional, or national group or groups in order to bring about progressive societal
change” (87). In the case of my students’ projects, I will extend “writing” to include the four modes of written, oral, visual, and electronic communication.

In this section, I briefly discuss the changes in composition that helped drive a new interest in public writing. Following this brief history, I review scholarship both advocating and criticizing the aims of public writing in the composition classroom.

*Composition moves out of the head*

Between the late 1970s and mid-1980s composition was in transition. The expressivist and cognitive models of writing that dominated pedagogy throughout the previous twenty years were increasingly contested for their views of writers as isolated, autonomous entities whose writing processes existed in vacuums disconnected from the social processes of their environments.

In his seminal 1989 *College English* article “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” James Berlin explains that though expressivists were critical of the social, political, and cultural practices of the era, resistance to these practices were understood to occur within the individual: “The underlying conviction of expressionists [was] that when individuals are spared the distorting effects of a repressive social order, their privately determined truths will correspond to the privately determined truths of others” (485). The premise was that a writer could resist oppressive power structures evident in the language of others by not engaging with those “others” but instead turning inward to find truth. As Peter Elbow writes in *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Teaching and Learning*, “If I want power, I’ve got to use my voice” (202). From this perspective, transforming public discourse, or
the discourse of a community, comes after transformation has been achieved *en solo* by the autonomous writer.

Equally contested was the cognitive model of writing, advocated by scholars like Janet Emig, Linda Flower, and John Hayes. Other scholars were concerned that a solely cognitive approach to the writing process neglected to “recognize the degree to which the social and political contexts of discourse open up or foreclose the possibilities of mastering dominant discourse for particular students” (Weisser 110). The argument was that writers who don’t understand the social and political histories embedded in their language are unprepared to understand the power or lack thereof evident in their words. Again, reflecting on the implications of conceiving of the writing process as entirely within the individual, Berlin writes:

> That the cognitive skills leading to success may be the product of the experiences of a particular social class rather than the perfecting of inherent mental structures, skills encouraged because they serve the interests of a ruling economic elite, is never considered in the ‘scientific’ investigation of the mind. (“Ideology” 483)

What the field needed was a writing model that accounted for the effect of external forces on a writer’s composition process. Marilyn Cooper’s 1986 article, “The Ecology of Writing” provided such a model.

Cooper’s theory is founded on the premise that a writer, much like any organism, exists within a living system. Writing, Cooper argues, is an “activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of social systems” (4). She explains that the writer does not simply operate in a context “isolated from the social world,” nor does s/he produce ideas that “[originate] primarily within
[her]/himself directed at an unknown and largely hostile other” (4). Instead, the writer’s approach is void of any single structured process, and is more accurately understood as an interaction where “language and texts are not simply the means by which individuals discover and communicate information, but are essentially social activities, dependent on social structures and processes not only in their interpretive but also in their constructive phases” (5). This ecological or systems-based writing model now allowed for the writer to be seen as an agent interacting within social, political, and ideological structures.

Of course, the ecological model, does not completely divest the writer of autonomy. Berlin explains that the “self” and the “social” exist in a dialectical relationship. A writer’s autonomy, then, is “possible not through becoming detached from the social, but through resisting those social influences that alienate and disempower, doing so, moreover, in and through social activity” (“Ideology” 491).

Now, the perception of the writer was of someone no longer bound by his/her mental processes, but of an active and reactive entity existing within real environments with socially constituted structures. As the systems-based approach to writing moved through the field, compositionists began expanding their curricula outside the confines of the classroom.

**The public writing revival**

Though the bulk of scholarship on public writing (ecocomposition, place-conscious pedagogy, service-learning) has come about within the last twenty years, scholars such as S. Michael Halloran felt the need to return to a more classical
curriculum in the rhetorically-based composition classroom as early as the beginning of the 1980s. Halloran’s “Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: The Decline of Public Discourse” criticized the so-called “current-traditional rhetoric” for its complete departure from true classical notions of rhetorical education concerned with public discourse. Halloran saw rhetoric’s goal as educating a person “who embodies all that is best in a culture and brings it to bear on public problems through eloquent discourse” (94). Both Quintilian, with his good man speaking well, and Cicero, with his doctus orator—the learned speaker—taught of a “civic leader who understood all the values of his culture and used artful speech to make those values effective in the arena of public affairs” (94). Halloran’s concern was that the individualistic and isolated writing processes being taught at the time of his article neglected these foundations of public communication that are core to a rhetorical curriculum.

Others have echoed Halloran’s call to move public discourse back into the composition classroom. Compositionists such as James Berlin, Sidney Dobrin, Christian Weisser, Bruce Herzberg, Paul Heilker, Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds, and others have strongly urged those in composition studies to recognize the correlation between a rhetorical composition classroom and the education of critical citizens. Not only has the amount of debate about the relevance of public writing and civic literacy increased within journals and academic presses, but also in First-Year Composition (FYC) textbooks. The past twenty years have seen the publication of entire student rhetorics and readers devoted to topics of civic responsibility or advocacy (Composing a Civic Life: A Rhetoric and Readings for Inquiry and Action by Berndt and Muse, Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy: The Critical
Citizen’s Guide to Argumentative Rhetoric by Lazere, Writing and Community Action: A Service Learning Rhetoric and Reader by Deans, and Compose, Design, Advocate by Wysocki and Lynch), engaging topics that had generally been relegated to the social sciences (Lazere xiv). The specific assignments that accompany these texts have taken a variety of forms.

Writing assignments that ask students to engage with public forums have, over the years, often taken the form of classroom debates, current events essays, letters to the editor, mock proposals to student government bodies, and the like (Dobrin and Weisser, “Natural Discourse” 110). Though these kinds of projects force students to consider a specific and real audience, Joseph Harris argues that they can “quickly seem absurdly decontextualized and formulaic in classrooms that are cut off from meaningful contact with the real public discourse of society” (qtd in “Natural Discourse” 110). Sharing this same skepticism of “public” writing projects which are, nonetheless, kept within the classroom, Paul Heilker argues for pedagogical opportunities that place students within the actual rhetorical situations that their writing addresses: “Writing teachers need to relocate the where of composition instruction outside the academic classroom because the classroom does not and cannot offer students real rhetorical situations in which to understand writing as social action” (“Rhetoric Made Real: Civic Discourse and Writing Beyond the Curriculum” 71). To create access to real rhetorical situations, some in composition (including Heilker) have found service-learning approaches to provide sites for students to experience their communication in action.

Service-learning often involves students being assigned to volunteer work in soup kitchens, non-profits, or other local organizations with poor funding and in
need of personnel. Coordinated by the instructor, department, or campus service-learning office, these projects attempt to develop students’ social consciousness. Bruce Herzberg states that students in his service-learning courses do “report that their fears and prejudices diminish or disappear, that they are moved by the experience of helping others, and that they feel a commitment to help more” (“Community Service and Critical Teaching” 58). However, Herzberg still questions whether or not traditional service-learning helps students develop a broader social consciousness outside of their own personal experience. Reflecting on journals written by students involved in service-learning, Herzberg writes, “I worry when our students report, as they frequently do, that homelessness and poverty were abstractions before they met the homeless and poor, but now they see that the homeless are people ‘just like themselves’” (58). Others have also been troubled that service-learning projects neglect to inform students of systemic patterns that marginalize the people or places where they are working. Susan Stroud, director of Campus Compact, a national non-profit coordinating service-learning efforts in higher education, issued this statement in the organization’s 1992 executive summary: “If our community service efforts are not structured to raise the questions that result in critical analysis of the issues, then we are not involved in education and social change – we are involved in charity” (qtd in Herzberg 59). Herzberg and others (Bickford and Reynolds 2002; Coogan 2009; Schutz and Gere 1998) argue for a stronger emphasis on community literacy before students are planted in a service situation. Understanding, for example, that receiving welfare or living homeless are rarely results of individual life choices but rather a result of larger societal problems,
is the kind of learning Herzberg advocates. However, critical awareness may not be the only aspect of service-learning in need of examination.

In her essay “Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges and Questions,” Nora Bacon argues that though service-learning opportunities do provide sites from which to develop the social consciousness of students, there can often be problems with developing students’ sense of authenticity. Like Herzberg, Bacon shares positive reactions that students submit during end-of-semester reflections. According to Bacon, students are pleased that service-learning provides them with a “real audience and purpose,” “[exposure] to new people and new environments,” and the ability to “contribute to a community organization” (41). Certainly, students appreciate the novelty of writing on a tangible subject and for a tangible audience. However, students often lose the authenticity of the writing experience when there is ambiguity about who the real audience is: the organization or the teacher. Bacon sees the theoretical shift from the classroom audience to the community audience to be slightly idealistic:

The distinction between the artificial classroom and the real world is overly simplistic; really, students are being asked to write for both a teacher and a community audience, and perhaps it is not surprising that the teacher – with whom they have more contact, and whose power may be more salient in their lives – sometimes comes first. (43)

Too often, the power of the grading pen will outweigh the audience needs of the organization, leaving the student to “subordinate the purpose” of the writing to a focus on the “mastery of a skill” (Bacon 42).
Bacon also questions service-learning’s authenticity for its scripted direction and imposed agendas. When the instructor coordinates which organizations the class will be working with, students can’t learn how to seek these organizations on their own. Also, those organizations may be in direct conflict with the ideologies of the students. On the latter point, Bacon worries that instructors who place students in pre-determined organizations are “denying them the authenticity of their own voices, of their own opinions” (45). And though a critical writing class should ask students to inhabit the position of the “other” in order to better understand personal beliefs, public writing situations that force a student to be “othered” in public are problematic.

On the positionality of the student, Bacon sees an important distinction between writing for an academic exercise and writing for the community. In an exercise, the student can try out inhabiting other positions in a safe environment where all involved understand the nature of the exercise. When writing for the community, however, the “key purpose” is to “advance the agency’s work” (45). This work may be counter to a student’s deeply held beliefs. For students to have their names on public documents from organizations they don’t necessarily agree with can be extremely uncomfortable and counterproductive for a student’s learning process. To address the problem of authenticity as well as other problems with service-learning, scholars such as Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds have called on compositionists to consider the benefits of activist education.

In their highly influential 2002 article in Pedagogy, “Activism and Service-learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent,” Bickford and Reynolds explore the connection between activism and service-learning, issuing a call to
educators to see activism as a necessary partner to service-learning curricula. The authors situate their argument in the ongoing debate of service-learning and the problems of student resistance to activist or social change mentalities. For Bickford and Reynolds, the problem is not that service-learning avoids activism. Sharing Herzberg’s (1997) argument, they argue that “service-learning, while it can be activist, is too often infused with the volunteer ethos, a philanthropic or charitable viewpoint that ignores the structural reasons to help others” (230). To counteract such drawbacks, they suggest that an “historical and geographic approach to activist learning projects will give learners a broader understanding of dissent and will encourage them to envision themselves as actors or agents in political arenas” (230).

Bickford and Reynolds clearly outline the major problems that others have found in current service-learning curricula. Adding to the criticisms from Bacon (1997) and Herzberg (1997), the authors quote Kathryn Forbes in arguing that in the volunteerism and charity work seen in many service-learning programs, students take their “subject positions with them,” making service-learning an “exercise in observing otherness” (my emphasis, 232). The authors submit that designing classrooms to avoid the preservation of students’ preconceived notions and stereotypes about class and community dynamics is no small task. However, we are doing students a disservice if they understand themselves as “liberal saviors” swooping in to solve problems (Schutz and Gere qtd in Bickford and Reynolds 233).

Additionally, Bickford and Reynolds worry that service-learning creates a binary between what happens on campus versus what happens in the “real” world. Too often, the emphasis on community-service composition reinforces students’ inability to see the place of their own university or college as problematic (235-36).
Bickford and Reynolds argue that in an activist-focused classroom, “students do not need to leave the college or university to engage in acts of dissent. Neither do they need to take part only in large-scale, long-term projects to learn something about social change practices that we might call activism” (243). I agree with Bickford and Reynolds that it is vital to help students see activism as a process that is as accessible and as important as off-campus service work. However, convincing students that campus actions are of an activist nature arises from students’ preconceived notions of activism.

The authors explain that students “imagine activists as heroes, courageous and dedicated in ways that seem impossible to emulate” and “do not see themselves as actors in either local or larger arenas” (232). Part of the problem is that many students come to our classes with the understanding that social movements, like those existing in the civil rights era, are “ancient history,” far removed from their present experience. Images of the Million Man March or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have become iconic of movements so large that students have a hard time seeing the small, local activist work that preceded those public-awareness events. Also, due to the magnitude and antiquated nature of these movements, Bickford and Reynolds report that most students simply don’t see social change as “necessary, effective, or interesting” (238). If activism is seen as part of a social movement and as an event situated in history, students will not see social change as a priority. In essence, Bickford and Reynolds argue that the foreignness of such impressions keep students from understanding the “power and necessity” of small actions in achieving social change (231-32).
Because there is a history in composition of students reacting to activist projects with emotions of apathy, “anger, outrage, pity, and contempt,” Bickford and Reynolds stress that whatever form activist lessons take, any engagement with the process of social change should be credited as a legitimate effort to affect the democratic process (245-46). The two authors close their article with a call to compositionists to investigate ways to enact place-based activist projects.

Though Bickford and Reynolds admirably discuss the real activism possibilities available on college campuses, they end their argument with a question that isn’t thoroughly answered by the end of the article: “Why do we fear activism and the act of dissent that activism comprises?” (247). With documented resistance to activist projects, it seems the insistence on using “activism” as the place-holder for any type of social action assignment obscures the positive change that can come from student projects that, though technically activist, don’t necessarily carry the radical historical baggage attached to the concept. Little has been published since Bickford and Reynolds (2002) about attempts to supplement service-learning literature with social action projects that avoid resistance to the activist mentality but also answer the call for additional place-focused action assignments. Following my discussion of critical pedagogy and place-conscious pedagogy, I will propose an assignment that attempts to fill the gaps in activist education in composition by placing the direction of the assignment in the students’ hands, rather than with the community organization or instructor. I will weave the following two strains of pedagogical theory into my course design.
Critical Pedagogy and Agency

The public writing classroom concerned with citizen action must have a lens that sees not only local problems, but also broader systemic causes of those problems, be they political, social, environmental, and/or cultural. Scholars of public writing (Bickford and Reynolds 2003; Gorzelsky 2009; Herzberg 1997; Smith 1994) have stressed the necessity of making questions of critical consciousness central to a classroom if students are to understand change as a process that is broader than individual experience. To have students who can begin to question the construction of social structures is to have students who are empowered, critical learners. However, for students to find empowerment, the classroom must be a safe space where they feel comfortable trying out “stranger experiences” and engaging the unfamiliar (Qualley 1997). And for students to attempt social change, they must see the experiential “other” of social action as an accessible reality. In this section, I will review prominent voices in critical pedagogy, specifically Paulo Freire, James Berlin, Donna Qualley, and Jeff Smith, and within that review, collect a number of perspectives on agency in the critical composition classroom as well as within the structural confines of social institutions (Cooper, Geisler, Giddens, Herndl and Licona).

Problem Posing for the Oppressed

Without question, current critical pedagogy theory owes its present direction to Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), an impassioned critique of the traditional “banking model” of education. The central concern for Freire is the dehumanizing effect of educational systems that have teachers in positions of
authority depositing “knowledge” into the heads of passive learners, thereby perpetuating the structures and concerns beneficial to those in power. Teachers in this system speak of reality “as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (71) and speak of the students as needing to be “integrated” and “incorporated” into the “healthy society” (74). In this form of education, students are blinded to the transformational capacity of being able to critically read the world.

Freire argues that through a dialogic pedagogy wherein the teacher functions as a critical problemposer who cultivates a classroom environment allowing students to question the conventions and practices of dominant social groups, students will be liberated from their dehumanized state. Freire writes that only when students “discover themselves to be ‘hosts’ of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy” (48). Indeed, this discovery opens the doors of agentive possibility. He writes that critically conscious students must “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform”; Freire explains further that “[this] perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action” (49). For Freire, it is in this transformation into a critically aware state that students find can see the possibility of effecting change.

Commenting on the utopian vision in Freire’s writing, Carl G. Herndl asserts that Freire was also concerned with promoting a “pedagogy of the possible” (“Paulo Freire” 275). In a 1992 interview with JAC editor, Gary Olson, Freire qualified his theory of transformation, explaining that there will always be structural limitations
inhibiting individuals from making large sweeping changes. Arguing to focus on small, local changes, Freire says, “we have to understand that the process of change starts exactly in the place that we would like to change” (Olson sec. 4). And though a locally-focused, less-radical pedagogy of social change seems realistic for primarily white, middle-class students at a Midwestern university, rhetorical critics (Cooper, Geisler, Herndl and Licona, and Miller) have questioned the reality of framing agency as property of the autonomous and efficacious change agent, an idea that I will link back to at the end of the chapter.

As with public writing scholarship, critical pedagogues have been concerned with educating students as informed and active citizens. Some (Berlin 1996; Shor 1992; Flower 2008) have stressed the tradition of rhetoric, while others have seen the critical classroom as a resistance against the privatizing forces of a market economy (Giroux, Aronowitz). However, regardless of their motivations, all regard Freire’s call for active critical classrooms as necessary for sustaining the health of participatory democracies.

In his last book before his death, James Berlin explains that, in these critical classrooms, students “must learn to locate the beneficiaries and the victims of knowledge, exerting their rights as citizens in a democracy to criticize freely those in power” (“Rhetorics” 55). To Berlin, education exists to shape “intelligent, articulate, and responsible citizens who understand their obligation and their right to insist that economic, social, and political power be exerted in the best interests of the community” (“Rhetorics” 55). However, before students can even find openings in their communities to criticize those in power, they must be able to identify
constructed cultural codes, or in Freireian terms, read the world.

Berlin argues that the critical classroom must make students aware of the “semiotically enforced cultural codes” that perpetuate the status quo and silence public dialogue. In developing cultural literacy, students need reading and writing experiences in which they can recognize and name these codes (121). Berlin suggests contrasting and comparing various media sources (film, radio, television) to help students recognize the cultural narratives that write their experiences. Other scholars have asked students to analyze environmental signage (Dobrin and Weisser 2001), popular advertisements (McComiskey 1997), and their relationships with computers/technology (Blakely Duffelmeyer 2000, 2002; Selfe and Selfe 1994). To act on their newfound critical perspectives, students need openings in which a sense of agency is available to them. Allowing students a share of the classroom authority, writes Berlin, is one way of avoiding resistance to critical literacy education.

To shape classroom conditions that invite students to actively identify enforced cultural codes, Berlin advises teachers to share classroom authority with students and to allow students to make choices about activities and class materials. “This means,” writes Berlin, “the student-teacher relation will be marked by a democratic dialogue that is both collaborative and disputatious” (119). Modeling this dialogue in the classroom and providing students the possibility to experience authority opens up a transformative moment where learning is no longer passive, but instead an active participation within a critical learning community.

However, the reality for most critical classrooms is that Freire and Berlin’s awareness of possible transformation doesn’t happen overnight, but instead exists as a process that is constantly developing. In order to begin this process, scholars of
critical pedagogy suggest that we help students first understand where they are when they enter the classroom so that they are better able to understand what they can see through alternative lenses. In the following section, I will review relevant scholarship on both recursion and reflection, and discuss their role in consciousness transformation and agency in the critical composition classroom.

Recursiveness, Reflection, and Additional Perspectives on Agency

In her book, *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*, Donna Qualley speaks to the power of teaching reflexivity in the writing process to engage students in patterns of critical self-examination. Defining the reflexive process, she explains that it “involves a commitment to both attending to what we believe and examining how we came to hold those beliefs while we are engaged in trying to make sense of an other”; this can be “one of the most powerful means we have to understand and bridge, without effacing, the differences that too often divide us” (5). Gwen Gorzelsky, in her examination of respect for student borders in the critical classroom, adds that for a learner to “take apart new concepts or skills to understand them, the learner needs clear boundaries between self and the unfamiliar” (68). In other words, both Qualley and Gorzelsky find that for students to be able to understand the “other,” they must first understand that their current position is also constructed and worthy of analysis. How instructors effectively lead students to this point is one of the recurring questions in the discipline.

Much has been written about the process of helping students step out of the comfortable passivity of banking education and into an engaged, critical process of
learning. Michael Ignelzi’s article, “Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process,” reviews Robert Kegan’s theory of meaning-making by using the metaphor of the farm. He writes that students often enter our classrooms having only ever explored the comfort of their own “farm,” or more specifically, their own “order of consciousness” or process of making meaning. Students at this level of development are able to co-construct their sense of meaning with other ideas, people, and intellectual influences in their environment. However, they do not “psychologically [differentiate] from these co-constructions” (8); Rather, their meaning-making process becomes a “fusion of other people’s expectations, theories, and ideas” (8).

For example, an adolescent might explain her reason for religious belief by claiming, “My parents raised me that way.” The ability to step off of one’s own metaphorical farm and critically examine the grounds of another is basically non-existent.

For students to get off of their farms and experience others’ farms, or ways of making meaning in the world, Ignelzi encourages instructors to figuratively accompany students in that move. Much like Qualley and Gorzelsky, Ignelzi suggests that instructors first help the student recognize his/her current stage of understanding as a legitimate position—one among many. Ignelzi claims that it is important for students to “feel supported by the external sources with whom they currently co-construct their meaning” (13). Ignelzi suggests that students need activities that “provide incrementally-structured supervised practice in moving towards generating [their] own ideas and theories” (my emphasis, 13). After all, as Jim Thomas writes, “the goal of critical thinking…is not to create like-minded ideologues” but to help students find ways to build on current processes of interpreting the world (18). Working from the foundations of existing student
positions is a strategy common to the critical classroom. For instead of assaulting the students’ current meaning-making processes, a teacher can make use of these positions by modeling the slightest shift toward an alternative perspective to help students experience a “modest rethinking of comfortable thoughts” (Thomas 19). The activities that help students make cognitive jumps into more critical modes of inquiry have taken a number of forms in the composition classroom.

Donna Qualley suggests that an integration of texts and reflections that promote self examination is key to the critical learning process: “[Students] need to be both the subject and the object of their reading (they read themselves as they read the text), which ensures that their encounter with ideas will be dialogic and bidirectional rather than unidirectional” (62). Reflection assignments should ask students to discuss acceptance and resistance to the text, while also pushing them to understand where their acceptance and resistance is coming from. Scholars have also discussed the power of instructors sharing personal narratives that show struggles with engaging the unfamiliar (Qualley 1997; Owens 2001; Gorzelsky 2009). Qualley explains that when we “share how we came to formulate our positions and how we came to hold the beliefs we do, we can model a way of approaching and thinking about ideas for students to emulate” (142). Convincing students that “I’ve been there too” is at the same time comforting and understanding of those still “co-constructing” knowledge with the instructor. How, then, do instructors in critical classrooms aid students in finding agency to transform their classroom analysis into real world action?

In his 1994 article, “Against ‘Illegeracy’: Toward a New Pedagogy of Civic Understanding,” Jeff Smith describes a condition that he believes afflicts the critical
senses of current students in the writing classroom. “Illegeracy,” as he terms the problem, is a form of illiteracy that affects students’ ability to read the world and understand the cultural situations in which they are embedded. More importantly, it is a complete failure to see certain “conditions of one’s life as open to choice,” thereby resulting in a complete “[abdication] of one’s political power to choose the direction of society” (200). One of the problems, according to Smith, is that the ethos of the non-critical writing classroom instills students with an understanding that “most of what the world gives us is just there, not somebody’s choice” and that as a result, “there is a failure…to realize that arguing something might be worthwhile” (204). If students can’t find available arguments, or even figure out how to look in the first place, the purpose of the writing classroom—a training ground for effective communication and civic involvement—is rendered null.

Smith matter-of-factly explains that people are naturally attracted to and engaged by that which affects their lives. In response to lessons that try to engage students with instructor-chosen social problems (i.e. service-learning, activist curriculum), Smith suggests that our instruction needs a “reframing of the issues that shows people the systems they’re enmeshed in and outlines the real choices available to them” (emphasis added, 210); it is only then when “people…will want to reassume their political role” (210). From Smith’s perspective, student agency is a direct consequence of the students engaging subject matter that has relevance to them while in a pedagogical environment that portrays “social realities as alterable constructs, not as transcendent or immutable structures” (Fishman and McCarthy 342). Expressing this approach through the language of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux envisions instruction and course texts that not only model, but also encourage, a
“language of possibility” (qtd in Fishman and McCarthy 342).

Agency and Social Structures

Thus far, any mention of agency has primarily been channeled through the lens of the critical composition classroom where agency is often understood as a force developed within the student: “the ownership of their developing ideas and texts” (Gorzelsky 66), transparency of “choice” (Smith), a sense for “possibility” and personal “transformation” (Freire). However, because this study is situated within the institutional environment of a university, my analysis profits from a review of agency as it concerns an actor’s relationship with larger social structures.

Earlier in the chapter, I remarked that some rhetorical critics have also criticized classical rhetoric’s view of agency as originating within the individual. Recent post-modern critiques of rhetorical agency refute the argument that a rhetor’s intention and skill alone can effect change within a community.

In his 2009 Keynote at CCCC, Charles Bazerman urged compositionists to reconsider the common notion that empowerment and agency come solely from within:

If we neglect the intertext and the social situations from which we draw and into which we write, we fail to recognize the very playing field and the very games in which we are engaged…[Writing] to situations means we are embedded within situations, their structures, the relevant knowledges, and the unfolding state of moves, discussion, and action. (575)

Some scholars have already attended to rethinking the field’s understanding of agency. Agency has been described as the taking of authority granted by various
genres (Danielewicz 2008), as situationally-constructed through classroom discourse (Ewald and Wallace 1994), and as historically-situated in local community actions (Flower 2008). And though composition studies increasingly sees agency as relative to social structures, research in both the social sciences (Giddens) and rhetoric (Cooper, Geisler, Herndl and Licona, Miller) can provide additional insights into where agency exists and how it is enacted.

Additional post-modern critiques of rhetorical agency refute the argument that a rhetor’s intention and skill alone can effect change within her community. In a 2004 survey of how rhetoric scholars understand agency, Cheryl Geisler quotes Dilip Gaonkar explaining that this faulty “ideology of agency” doesn’t account for the material and structural realities that keep some individuals, no matter how skilled, from creating change (“How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical Agency?” 3).

In an attempt to explain the subject’s actions as contingent and situated, Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration is grounded in the assumption that societal structure precedes individual human action. Drawing comparisons to the chicken/egg paradox, Giddens sees societal structure as the force that shapes human action – action that then reconstitutes that very same causal structure (“Constitution” 2). This “duality of structure,” as he terms it, illustrates how societal properties become the subject and outcome of the social actions that constitute the society’s structure (“Central problems” 69). Giddens’ duality isn’t a strict model of determinism, however. He sees structure simultaneously as both oppressive and liberating (“Critique” 51). Giddens terms this reciprocal property of social structures the “dialectic of control.”
The “dialectic of control” refers to the reciprocal nature of power relations existing within a social structure. Giddens believes the same social structure that constrains the actions of the individual provides the capacity or the “resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence [or subvert] the actions of their superiors” (“Constitution” 16). And assuming Giddens’ model of the duality of structure, a conscious actor’s end goal is essentially that s/he will constitute structures in order for the structures to become constituting.

Adding to Giddens’ theory of agency, but distancing themselves from the notion that agency is a permanent function of specific components of a social structure, Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona (2007) argue instead for a conceptualization of agency as the possibility of action situated in shifting social space that intersects at the overlap of temporal, semiotic, and material elements (137). For Herndl and Licona (as well as Miller 2007) agency is an event in time when the discursive and physical spaces of authority become available to the actor. An actor then can decide whether or not to act on the available agency. They argue that the knowledge of the organization is a powerful factor that determines the actor’s ability to take agency:

The knowledge of institutional or organizational practices offers subjects the opportunity for authoritative and agentive practices and relationships … Opportunities then are represented by the moment when the agent function or author function (re)produce the practices for the subject to speak with authority and act with a potential for change. (148)

In Herndl and Licona’s description, taking agency is a conscious decision by the actor to seize on the moment to speak with authority. That conscious decision,
however, is not solely a product of the agent, nor is its effect attributable solely to the agent’s action.

In a 2010 lecture titled “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” Marilyn Cooper explains the complexities of social change and how the agent’s action fits into the intricate web of history-thought-action-change:

[Though] the world changes in response to individual action, individuals do not directly cause change, nor do the changes in the world and in individuals necessarily result from what we commonly think of as conscious or free choices. Things change as individuals respond to other beings and objects in their environments — in other words, changes emerge as new patterns of action that form out of their interactions. (3)

Cooper is not denying the will of the individual, but is instead describing an agent who is constituted by multiple circumstances within his/her environment; this same agent’s choice to “perform” agency is merely one part of a constituting force (including material conditions, spatial conditions, temporal conditions, etc.) that creates a change.

Though Cooper’s “webbed” subject does have a part in the change, the uncertainty that results from naming the agent as only partly responsible for change causes anxiety in some scholars, specifically those concerned with the problematic task of providing a useable concept of agency to students.

C.M. Condit addressed this anxiety by claiming that if autonomous agency is indeed an illusion that needs to be taught in tandem with lessons of the social systems they’re emmeshed in, such a mirage is necessary. She argues that by “both exposing [students] to a broader range of symbolic concatenations and by getting
them to exercise their capacities for symbolic manipulation, we enhance the potential range of their choices, and hence give greater potential and vitality to their agency” (qtd in Geisler 6). Though this tension between complex causations and autonomous actor-caused change is unresolved in the field of composition, it opens up exciting opportunities for instructors to find new ways of teaching social change within the composition classroom while continuing to show students that their efforts do matter.

**Place-Based Pedagogy**

In the previous two sections, I’ve reviewed relevant literature within the academic discussions of public writing and critical pedagogy. In this third section, I discuss the call from various scholars in composition (Dobrin, Weisser, Owens) and in pedagogy (Gruenewald, Ball and Lai) to provide a local, place-based foundation in which to enact curricula such as those discussed in previous sections. I will overview valuable insights from ecocomposition and devote the majority of the section to a discussion of why those theorizing pedagogy envision the place-based classroom as an ideal site for social action education.

I should note that in this section I use the words “environment” and “place” in a way that some might interpret as interchangeable. For practical purposes, my use of the word “environment” will refer specifically to ecological or natural constructs – as most in ecocomposition have come to understand it. On the other hand, My use of the word “place” refers to the aggregate of physical, social, and historical elements that writers are situated in; particularly within this study, I understand “place” as synonymous with the institutional and community locales. I
do not intend to separate the “natural” environment from the writer’s place, nor would I advocate for that ever to be the case. However, to accurately represent the work of place-based pedagogy and not confuse my students’ projects with “ecojustice” actions, “environment” will be reserved for the mountains and trees.

Ecocomposition

Attributing ecocomposition’s roots to a combination of ecocriticism, environmental rhetoric, and Marilyn Cooper’s ecological writing model, Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser explain ecocomposition to be a model “concerned with textual production and the environments that affect and are affected by the production of discourse” (“Breaking Ground” 573). Agreeing with Carl Herndl and Stuart Brown’s (1996) assertion that “there is no objective environment in the phenomenal world, no environment separate from the words we use to represent it,” ecocomposition is a discipline aspiring to teach students the constructed nature of built and natural environments in order to write the environment in a responsible and sustainable fashion (Green Culture 3). For this study’s purposes, however, the most beneficial insights can be found in ecocomposition’s discussion action within local places.

In a 2002 essay, “Writing Takes Place,” a self-coined mantra, Sidney Dobrin dispels the misconception that ecocomposition can benefit only those interested in teaching environmental literacy and topics related to the natural world: “While much of ecocomposition is informed by environmental and ecological theory and focuses on the ways in which nature gets written and mapped…ecocomposition must also be the study of the sites and places of writing, of discourse, of scholarship,
of pedagogy” (13). In fact, Dobrin, as well as Owens (1999), explains that one of ecocomposition’s most valuable facets is simply that an ecological metaphor of writing inherently accepts the responsibility to promote survival. When writing is situated in a local place, the writer can better understand herself as promoting or hindering the survival of that place and the subjects who are situated there. Dobrin writes, “Oppressive hegemonies manifest themselves in discourse…How we transgress those oppressive constructs, how we survive in them is both a matter of discursive maneuvering and a matter of physical, material positioning, and consequence” (12).

Additionally, Dobrin explains that the ecological model gives writers a more dynamic context in which to operate: “Context seems passive at times, a backdrop to the writing. Thinking of context from an ecological point of view, we are never separate from context: it reverberates within us and we reverberate in it (21). Relating to Freire’s understanding of how one communicates in the world, the view of context as ecological forces the writer to compose within the place rather than about it. For this reason, scholars of public writing and place-based pedagogy find ecocomposition to provide a theoretical understanding of the very real situations in which writers can come to see their work as social action.

**Place-Based Pedagogy**

In a previous section, I outlined Bickford and Reynolds’ (2002) argument concerning activist composition lessons situated in a campus place. To reiterate, the authors explain that the campus, a place familiar to our students, provides an ideal setting for students to “analyze the politics of space, the effects of the built
environment, the complexities of being the insider or the outsider, or the functions of surveillance and control in public or semipublic spaces” (241). Though not born from composition and rhetoric, place-based pedagogy provides necessary groundwork for understanding how to frame and execute effective action-focused curricula in the composition/rhetoric classroom.

At its most basic, place-based pedagogy aims to refocus the goals of education toward teaching students accountability to their local communities. In his 2003 article, “Foundations of Place: A Multi-Disciplinary Framework for Place Conscious Education,” David Gruenewald argues that current schooling methods conceal the construction of places and, unfortunately, distance students from any ethic of nurture or care for their place:

Because the structures and processes of schooling are based on institutional patterns of isolating teachers and students from places outside school, one can claim that schools limit experience and perception...[Schools] potentially stunt human development as they help construct our lack of awareness, our lack of connection to, and our lack of appreciation for places. (625)

Additionally, disconnecting students from a relationship with place can cause the constructs of communities, institutions, local environments, to disappear into the periphery, turning the experience of place into little more than an unaffected, non-contextual background. Much like Jeff Smith’s (1994) characterization of “illegeracy,” Gruenewald finds that an education blind to place promotes passive acceptance of local practices. He writes,

When we fail to consider places as products of human decisions, we accept their existence as noncontroversial and inevitable, like the falling of rain or
the face of the sunrise. Moreover, when we accept the existence of places as unproblematic...we also become complicit in the political processes, however problematic, that stewarded these places into being and that continue to legitimize them. (627)

Thus, place-based education is necessary to help students see places not as immutable realities, but as “made” places that can be shaped by human action. The democratic responsibilities of a rhetorically based composition classroom can benefit from these insights of accountability. Because democracies are inherently participatory, Gruenwald finds that education “must provide opportunities for students to participate meaningfully in the process of place making, that is, in the process of shaping what our places will become” (627). Though pedagogies of place have the promise of showing students the changeable local systems they’re enmeshed in, there is, as mentioned in previous sections, the likelihood of student resistance to this undertaking.

In their 2006 article, “Place Based Pedagogy for the Arts and Humanities,” Eric Ball and Alice Lai concede that though an education focused on place is well intentioned, student resistance can hamper efforts. In today’s plugged-in university curricula, Ball and Lai find that students are likely to be more attracted to products of mass media and pop culture. Prompting sincere student involvement with place-based pedagogies “depends on extant interest among students in their local context: if there is ‘enough’ interest, students might be compelled to learn more, to learn more critically, and to care more deeply about it” (268).

A second challenge when working with a place-based classroom is the careful response to student resistance on topics of “sociopolitical transformation” (270). Ball
and Lai quote Gruenewald claiming “we should pursue pedagogical strategies that honor a learner’s developmental readiness for engaging with complex ecological themes…” (272). Much like Jim Thomas’s concept of moving students to “modestly rethink comfortable thoughts,” a place-based approach must not be too confrontational. For if “students perceive that the educator’s goals of sociological transformation run counter to their own desires to succeed with the overall status quo, they are not likely to find such pedagogies internally persuasive” (Ball and Lai 272). Fortunately, Ball and Lai find that students are most successful in taking ownership of transformative learning if their place supports a strong sense of local identity or pride. For places like college campuses, where individuals identify with their institutional culture, this type of pride might be more prevalent.

The next chapter will outline a series of multimodal communication projects that draw inspiration from a combination of the themes and suggestions found in the above literature. I will be outlining an approach I took in a First-Year Communication classroom to teach social action by using a critical, place-based approach.
3. Data Collection and Methods

As stated, the purpose of this participatory action study was to gauge the extent to which small-scale, place-based action projects in the multimodal composition classroom can make social action accessible to students while avoiding the documented setbacks with service-learning projects. Analyzing students’ written and verbal understanding of “social action,” in particular, I attempted to understand the extent to which students saw themselves as agents capable of communicative action in the places of Iowa State University and the broader Ames community. The following research questions guided my study:

- What are possible ways to teach social action projects that can function as alternatives to service-learning and activist-based lessons?
- To what extent can place-based social action projects allow students to see themselves as capable of social action in the future?

The questions outlined here grew from my interest in ecocomposition theory that emerged through a number of projects in a critical composition theory course I took during my second semester in the Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication program at Iowa State University. I was specifically concerned with answering the call of compositionists to find accessible outlets for students to see public social action as relevant and accessible. Though the final design of the course I study here did not draw as heavily upon ecocomposition as I had originally
planned, the explicit focus on converting analysis to action has remained strong throughout.

As I noted in the introduction, I was fortunate enough to have academic experiences early on in higher education that promoted my growth as a communicative citizen. Building on ISUComm’s charge for instructors to “prepare [students] to communicate with confidence and integrity in the varied contexts of their academic, professional, and civic lives,” I was interested in making civic communication a tangible experience that students could try out while still in the classroom (ISUComm Instructor Guide 5-6). This is not to claim that current practices in the ISUComm program fail to ask students to engage public audiences. Many instructors encourage students to compose poster presentations, class-run magazines, and radio essays. These projects are presented publicly in venues such as the Memorial Union or reserved lounges in Ross Hall, where faculty and fellow students serve as the audience for these creative multimodal arguments.

However, the choreographed places of the Memorial Union and Ross Hall offer publics that are chosen by the instructors and involve no active pursuit of audience on the part of the student communicators. David Coogan (2006) has argued that effective public writing classrooms should encourage students to “discover the arguments that already exist in the communities they wish to serve” (668). If we are to take a post-modern view of a public, as Gerard Hauser observes, we need to help students discover the “interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (Vernacular Voices, 32). Bringing the audience to students in the structured context of academic poster presentations doesn’t
encourage the kind of public engagement they will encounter when they step out off the podium on graduation day.

Having taken the seminar on critical composition pedagogy with Dr. Barb Blakely, the Director of ISUComm Foundation Courses, I was in a unique position to discuss possibilities for modifying course assignments to better address the issue of authentic public engagement. Having reviewed a good chunk of the literature on composition-based service-learning that came out in the mid-1990s, I was inspired to add to the conversation. What my proposed assignments seemed to address that service-learning programs did not do successfully were the problems of project authenticity, audience ambiguity, the multiple realities of activism, and student resistance. Additionally, I was concerned that though the literature is rife with examples of infusing critical pedagogy into service-learning classrooms, little has been argued about the barrier between student action and inaction. How do we know that the critical literacy we are helping our students develop is actually being put to action? Are we, in our attention to analysis, avoiding the equally important question? That is, are we showing students the door between analysis and action and failing to open it for them? The design of the following study responds specifically to the calls of Jeff Smith (1996) and David Gruenewald (2003) as it attempts to provide realistic opportunities for students to address problems in their local places and see that there are arguments available and worth making.

Due to my position as a graduate teaching assistant with three ISUComm Foundation courses under my belt, I was ideally situated to find classroom participants. After gaining IRB approval, at the beginning of the 2009 fall semester, I distributed informed consent documents to my two ENGL-250 sections of 26
students each. The students in these two sections were primarily sophomores and juniors, 33 of them women, 18 men. Of the original classes, 44 students consented to participate in the study. The majority of students grew up in Iowa communities, with a minority coming from urban areas such as Des Moines, Minneapolis, and Chicago.

Because students enacted their projects outside of the classroom, the institutional place of Iowa State was a significant site in this study. Iowa State University is a science and technology land grant institution located in the heart of the midwest United States. Due to the nature of ISU academic programs, many students were interested in engineering, agriculture, biology, or business. Very few were studying in the humanities or liberal arts. Certain aspects of the institution provide a good setting for the students’ projects. Within the last few years, Iowa State University has headed up the Live Green Initiative, an all-campus push towards behavioral and operational sustainability. The director of sustainability, Merry Rankin, is always looking for new ways to promote the green lifestyles and is quite willing to work with student projects. Also, a very active Student Activities Council aids in the promotion of events created by sponsored student groups.

**Design and Methods**

My qualitative study design follows the tradition of grounded theory research. I’ve based the design on the approaches discussed by John W. Creswell in *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Taking Creswell’s lead, I’ve designed my grounded theory approach to “[derive] a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of
participants…using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information” (13). Both during the study, as well as after, I engage in constant comparison of data from certain instruments (reflections, questionnaires, writing assignments) with other instruments to find emerging categories and thematic patterns in participant responses and course work.

An equally significant aspect of my research design is its utilization of participatory action research methods. Utilized in both composition (Bizzell and Herzberg 1987) and professional communication (Herndl and Narhwold 2000), participatory action research (PAR) is a model of social research in which the researcher works in conjunction with participants to further social transformation. As Stephen Kemmis and Robert McTaggart write in “Participatory Action Research: Communicative Action and the Public Sphere,” PAR is distinguishable by the “shared ownership” of the project, analysis of social problems, and its “orientation toward community action” (273). In terms of classroom action research, Kemmis and McTaggart see the outcomes as more than simple justifications for pedagogical theory, but instead see it as practical in the sense of Aristotle’s practical reasoning in that the research models “how to act rightly and properly in a situation with which one is confronted” (274).

The PAR model is most valuable for social transformation projects due to its emphasis on self-reflective cycles practiced by both researchers and participants. In the PAR process, the researcher plans a change, acts, observes outcomes, reflects on the outcomes, and replans to begin the process again. What develops from this iterative research design is researcher’s and participants’ critical consciousness of project successes and failures. The awareness of social outcomes is central to the
research process, because as Kemmis and McTaggart argue, “the object of participatory action research is social; participatory action research is directed toward studying, reframing, and reconstructing social practices” (277). Ultimately, a PAR design attempts to give voice to participants by “opening communicative space,” thereby enabling them to direct their social action in ways that gets things done in the world (277).

In my PAR design, the iterative researcher reflection was evident from the beginning as I asked students to identify their understanding of and willingness to engage in social action. From these initial responses, I was better able to get a sense for how to present course materials and frame action in a way that seemed accessible and realistic. The cyclical reflection process I used as researcher was informed by my constant interaction with student participants and my willingness to appear to the class as a co-explorer in the process, asking for feedback throughout each project to better hone its effectiveness. Not only did the researcher-participant interaction continually shape the transformation process, but as I discuss below, the intimate knowledge of participant concerns and suggestions allowed for an increased level of validity, confirming or disconfirming my interpretations of participant reflections throughout the process.

**Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the ethical treatment of research participants, I’ve successfully completed the training course on human subjects research as required by the Intuitional Review Board at Iowa State University. Participants were briefed on the voluntary nature of the study and given clear instructions of their ability to
withdraw from the study at any point. Those who agreed to the terms of the study signed consent forms distributed by a co-researcher in the classroom research site. Signed forms were kept in a locked file and remained unavailable to me, the primary researcher, until end of semester grades had been submitted to the university registrar.

Validity

To ensure validity in analysis of participant data, I abided by the following processes:

• Triangulation – I analyzed a variety of data sources to cross-verify emerging themes coming from participant feedback and coursework. Validity is determined when emerging themes from a variety of sources demonstrate consistency.

• Rich Description – Rich and detailed description helps tell the story of the study, situating the reading audience in the classroom setting where the study emerged. Lengthy description of the classroom and researcher/participant interaction illustrate the extent to which I, the researcher, was engaged with the project.

• Presentation of Negative Data – In my sampling of participant feedback and results, I provided some negative data that runs counter to the participant feedback confirming the social transformation of the study. Providing negative data not only demonstrates researcher trustworthiness, but also challenges the researcher to argue for the relevance of the positive data.
• Member checking – The iterative-style of the PAR design allowed for me to cross-validate my interpretations of participant feedback. However, for post-study work, I’m relying on end-of-semester participant reflections to cross-validate my interpretations of their earlier work. Also, I contacted some participants post-study to validate various interpretations I made of their in-semester reflections.

**Data Collection**

Over the course of the semester, I asked student participants to record observations and reflections within the following forms and assignments:

- Data Collection #1: Beginning-of-Semester Questionnaire (Appendix A).
- Data Collection #2: Visual Argument of Social Action
- Data Collection #3: Brett Johnson Interview Reflection (Appendix B)
- Data Collection #4: Action Proposal (Appendix C)
- Data Collection #5: Place-Based Action Project Reflections (mid-process and final) (Appendix D)
- Data Collection #6: End-of-semester Reflection (Appendix E).

The beginning-of-semester questionnaire and the end of semester reflection were designed to gauge the change in students’ understanding of social action and their willingness to engage in it. I used the other intermittent reflections and coursework to get a progressive glimpse of students’ sense of possibility with the social action work. Also, I hoped these glimpses would possibly pinpoint the
moments within student development where the possibility or lack-of was opened up by a course tool or assignment. A goal throughout this entire course was to encourage active and up-to-date reflection. As Donna Qualley writes,

A reflexive pedagogy emphasizes understanding. Understanding represents both the process and product of the transaction between knower and known. I suppose that occasionally we might experience understanding as a sudden flash of insight, the eureka moment. More frequently, however, I believe the realization that we understand emerges gradually, and we only become aware of it when we make a reflexive turn. (151)

The gradual emergence of understanding necessitates continual reflection, especially in a study that gauges the extent to which these course projects open students to the possibility of social action. There must be opportunities at every “turn” for students to report on their progress or stagnancy.

Below I provide a detailed description of each data instrument under analysis, explaining its relevance to the data collection, but also its purpose as a pedagogical tool. Within the list of the various data collection points, I will guide the reader through a scaffold of the assignments taught over the course of the semester. As not to confuse the reader, I’ve shaded the headings for the data collection points and have left the unanalyzed course assignments unshaded. The only exception is Assignment #4 which was both a major assignment and a data instrument.
In the first week of class, I introduced students to the democratic tradition of the classical rhetoric education. Explaining to them that we would explore the possibilities of this classical tradition in a multimodal composition classroom, I gave them the initial questionnaire and asked them to share current impressions of social action and its relevance in their lives. By basing my introduction to the course in an established tradition, I hoped to avoid immediate resistance sometimes found in critical composition classrooms.

On the last day of class, I distributed the end of semester reflection as a capstone piece for the student portfolios. The portfolios were collections of student writing, revisions, and reflections from the entire semester. The purpose of the capstone reflection piece was to allow students to describe what they believed they learned in the course and to project on their future a prediction of the extent to which locally-designed place-based action would play a part in their lives.

The end of the semester reflections also provided me an implicit “member-check” on the data collected earlier in the semester. My interpretations of their growth can be triangulated against this final reflection determining the effect that this course had on their sense of empowerment and ability to act.
Major Assignment #1 (Week 1):
A Personal Narrative of Place

The narrative of place was assigned on the first day of class and was the first writing assignment that asked students to think about their relationship to a place. Adapted from Derek Owens place-narrative assignment from his ecocomposition-themed book, *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*, the basic prompts asked students to give a narrative description of a place they’ve lived in. An additional prompt also asked students to try to identify a problem in that place that should be addressed. Addressing Gruenewald’s concern of schooling processes that represent place as unproblematic, this initial writing exercise provided space for students to question the livability and inevitability of their places. And though this was a though exercise, the place narrative attempted to set the tone for the semester that students should consider themselves active participants in “place-making” (Gruenewald 627).

Data Collection #2 (Week 2):
Visual Argument of Social Action

In keeping with the multimodal underpinnings of the ISUComm classroom, I asked each student to find a photograph online making a visual argument of what social action meant to them. These images, which students sent to me by email during the second week of class, were compiled into a PowerPoint and displayed seven weeks later after the completion of the Better World Blog Journal (see Appendix). Because
the Better World Blog Journal asked students to develop ideas for local actions on campus, I decided to use students’ initial visual arguments of social action as the foundation for a reflective discussion on the extent to which their visualization of social action was being transformed.

For students who might not have been as comfortable articulating descriptions of social action in the first-week questionnaire, I believed asking students to make visual arguments of social action would provide a more concrete definition that I would be able to triangulate with their verbal responses.

**Better World Blog Journal (Weeks 2-8)**

One of the main texts for this action-focused class was *The Better World Handbook (BWH)* by Ellis Jones, Ross Haenfler, and Brett Johnson. Though not a textbook, the *BWH* is written for citizens who may care about social problems, but have no motivation to address those problems. And even for those individuals who are disinterested in the world’s problems, the book non-confrontationally frames inaction as upholding the status quo and then explains the problems that inaction perpetuates. In an empathetic gesture, the authors discuss ten traps that most people fall into when given the choice to act or not. Traps such as “that’s just the way the world is” and “I can’t make enough of a difference to matter” provide essential starting points for students to see that they aren’t being singled out for their inaction – many people experience these feelings (4-6). Following the chapter on traps, the book summarizes “seven foundations for a better world” (Economic Fairness, Comprehensive Peace, Ecological Sustainability, Deep Democracy, Social Justice,
Culture of Simplicity, and Revitalized Community) that provide context for many major social problems along with larger social movements addressing these problems. The remainder of the book is divided into chapters based on aspects of a person’s day-to-day living (e.g. Money, Shopping, Food, Work). The book works well for a mainstream classroom, because it answers Bickford and Reynolds’s call for lessons that teach realistic actions students can take in their daily lives to promote the various foundations for a better world. The next major assignment (Data Collection #4), as well as the action project (Assignment #5), utilized many readings from this book.

In order to help students take the first step toward public writing, I asked them to create blogs using the blog service, blogger.com. Each week, students were to read one of the “seven foundations for a better world” from BWH. These seven foundations provided context for systemic social problems evident around the world. Students were asked to summarize the reading, ask questions of the text, and most importantly, propose a change in their local campus place that could address these larger systemic problems on a local level. The BWH also provided a wealth of small action ideas relating to these seven foundations.

After students published their weekly blogs, they were encouraged to respond to their classmates’ posts, not only to foster a critical composing environment, but also to help refine action ideas and generate—as Giroux says, a “language of possibility” (qtd in Fishman and McCarthy 342). Adding to the discussion of the value of “webbed” or electronic communication in their article “Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition: Exploring Relationships Between Discourse and Environment,” Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser explain that assignments
such as the blog journal

allow students to see bits of information, pages, links, and ideas relationally.

Students recognize that knowledge depends upon its relationships with other knowledge, that facts, texts, and even selves depend upon shared resources, and that productivity can be group-generated and group-maintained. (586)

In terms of the social action-themed course, I was interested to see if writing within a class blog community aided students in generating and maintaining a “knowledge” of possibility towards ideas of local action. Only in the electronic mode of blogging can students develop a *dynamic* database of action ideas, a possibility not afforded by pencil and paper journaling. And because PAR studies are grounded in a commitment to social transformation and empowerment, the blog provided the initial opening in the communicative space of local social action (Kemmis and McTaggart 277).

Additional blog entries included student reflections on an iChat interview that the class conducted with Brett Johnson (mentioned below), one of the authors of the BWH. Also, students wrote blog reflections on short readings they did from author Wendell Berry (“A Regional Motive”) and snippets from a David Gruenewald piece (“A Place-Conscious Framework”).

**Major Assignment #2 (Weeks 2-5):**

*Commercial Analysis of Rhetorical Appeals and Place*

This assignment was an adaptation of the ISUComm visual analysis assignment in which students dissect and understand the rhetorical choices behind the arguments in the visual mode that they see every day (e.g. Print advertisements,
commercials, film, art). Students were asked to consider how the place of a commercial was constructed. In groups of four or five, students chose a commercial to analyze from a list I provided to them. The groups analyzed the commercial collaboratively, but wrote papers individually. To prompt students to think about the construction of the people and the places in the commercial, I provided the following hypothetical commercial storyline on the assignment sheet along with the types of questions I wanted students to consider:

*Watching a motorcycle commercial, you might see that a burly white man on a motorcycle is sweating and growling and has a scantily-clad female on his back seat as he speeds through a desert with heavy metal music playing in the background.*

...  

- *What people are allowed in the certain places the writers of the commercials have constructed? Who’s not present?*
- *Who benefits from how people are represented and situated in these places?*
- *What effects does reproducing these places have on how humans treat other humans? The natural environment?*

Though this assignment was admittedly ambitious, it was designed to provide an additional thought exercise to invite students to critically understand places as “products of human decisions” (Gruenewald 627). Instead of jumping straight into analysis and action within their own places, students needed a chance to see, albeit artificially, how human choices affect how we understand a place and interact with it. There are few better examples in popular media that show this deliberate design than television commercials. Because concepts of space construction and body construction can seem abstract when simply heard or read, utilizing visual literacy
assignments like the commercial analysis allows students to explore the physical outcomes of constructed spaces and individuals in a way that may not be as evident when read from an essay. Also, by having students analyze visuals at the beginning of the semester, Assignment #2 develops within them design strategies and visual language they use in the multimodal action projects in the last half of the semester.

To provide students an opportunity to further develop their visual literacy as well as their oral presentation skills, the student groups delivered PowerPoint oral presentations on a single commercial and discussed the elements of visual design that each group member had identified in their individual papers. The presentations allowed students to see how place was represented in a variety of contexts and also drive home that the construction of a place can be most obvious in the, seemingly, least expected of commercials (laundry detergent, lawn care products, fast food chains). Students wrote critical reflections following the completion of both assignments.

**Major Assignment #3 (Weeks 5-8): Rhetorical Analysis of a Speech**

Assigned during the same period of time when students were submitting their blog reflections, the Rhetorical Analysis of a Speech served to further student understanding about the deliberative choices made during the composition of an argument. Students analyzed speeches from such public figures as Former Vice President Al Gore, Gov. Sarah Palin, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and deceased author David Foster Wallace. Though this assignment stepped away from the place-themed units, I hoped that the
critical dissection of a textual argument would help students see the variety of rhetorical appeals necessary for composing convincing proposals in the next unit.

**Data Collection #3 (Week 9):**

**Better World Blogs: Interview Reflection**

During the second week of “Major Assignment #4: Place-Based Action Proposal” (below), the students and I were fortunate to speak with Better World Handbook co-author, Brett Johnson. Because of time commitments and distance, we spoke with Johnson using the computer application iChat. Professor Johnson was able to see the class through a digital video camera that I connected to my computer and the students were able to see Professor Johnson on a projection screen showing the desktop of the computer.

A professor of Sociology at Luther College, Johnson explained that the book was written in reaction to the cynicism that keeps many people from addressing social problems. Too often, he said, individuals understand addressing social problems as “saving the world,” a task too big for any one individual or community. Another problem, he argued, is that many people often conflate social action with images of gas-masked activists. These two problems combined make social action seem somewhat inaccessible to people, thus inviting inaction.

In a humorous and down-to-earth tone, Johnson explained the rhetorical appeals the book uses to help people see the many possibilities for action:
At the beginning of the book, we explain the world’s most pressing problems, making you totally depressed. Then, we show you that there are people, right now, doing things to address these problems. After that, we provide real, simple actions that you can make happen in your lives.

Johnson went on to explain that the majority of people don’t respond well when someone tells them to make a radical change. “People like choice,” he said, insisting that the students’ projects would be most effective if the persuasive appeals avoided giving orders and instead provided possibilities. Because Johnson’s book is essentially a proposal for change, he offered suggestions (on written organization to ethical considerations) they should consider when constructing the arguments for their proposals.

Following the interview with Professor Johnson, the students wrote reflective blogs on the insights they gained from the conversation. I also directed Johnson to the student sites so he could answer any questions that may have come up after the interview.

**Data Collection #4 (Weeks 8-11):**

**Major Assignment #4 Place-Based Action Proposal**

Assignment 4, the researched place-based action proposal, asked students to draw on their ideas from the Better World Blog Assignment and develop local, place-focused action projects that would utilize their multimodal communication skills in at least two of the four modes (written, oral, visual, electronic). Additionally, because this project was essentially an argument, students were asked
to write papers with an attention to their rhetorical appeals of logos, pathos, and ethos.

Basing their projects on the “seven foundations for a better world,” students created proposals for realistic social action projects that could be actualized in a student group on campus or in the Ames community. I encouraged students to let their academic or personal interests guide the direction of their action proposals. To direct students to the accessibility of social action, they must be able to identify with it. If an aspect of their lives can be part of that identity, there is a stronger exigency for them to respond to. As Ball and Lai argue, student interest in the topic of place-based projects will promote more deep learning, critical thought, and an ethic of care (268). Finally, the student-generated projects worked to avoid problems that service-learning projects often have with authenticity (Bacon 45).

Following the completion of these action proposals, students were asked to answer a series of reflective questions on the experience of conceptualizing and arguing for their action. Once students had completed and reflected on their action project proposals, each student composed a 250-word synopsis of his/her proposal to be compiled into an all-class collection of projects.

**Major Assignment #5 (Weeks 11-15):**  
**Place-Based Action Project**

Each student received a copy of the proposal compilation from the previous assignment and was assigned to read each synopsis. Upon reading the synopses, each student in the class submitted to me a ranked list of the top five projects he/she would be willing to work on in a group setting. I tallied the votes and selected the
top five most favored synopses in each class for individual group projects. In order to ensure student interest in the projects, I attempted to give at least 75% of students their first or second choices of projects. Due to the diversity of the project preferences, I was able to provide just under 70% of students with their first or second choices. Those students who had their proposals chosen by the class became the group “leaders,” unless they shared objections with me.

Once in groups, students were assigned to create the multimodal projects that their group leaders had proposed for the class vote. Because these projects were to be enacted within the place of the institution or in the local Ames community with no leadership from anyone but the students, there was certainly a possibility that the original plans would change or fall short of the initial goal. But as Kemmis and McTaggart argue, “The criterion for success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully but whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice” (277). In order to promote attention to the process of social action communication, I was consistently very frank with students about focusing their reflection on the process of the project rather than on a pre-determined, concrete, perhaps unrealistic, product/outcome. On two occasions, taking Berlin’s (1996) suggestion to promote shared classroom authority, I set up an open-forum discussion in which each group presented their progress and shared successes and failures with the other groups. I encouraged audience members to ask questions and give feedback regarding strategies their groups had used to overcome problems that the presenting group might have run into.
My focus on process was also evident in the evaluation of the group action projects. Students were not graded on the extent to which their projects were successes or failures, but to the extent that their projects met the needs of the audiences they identified in individual rhetorical analyses submitted with the projects. Asking students to complete a rhetorical analysis of the audience and direct their projects toward that audience was my strategy to avoid the problems of audience recognition identified in Nora Bacon’s (1997) study of her service-learning classroom.

Data Collection #5 (Week 12 and Week 15): Mid-Process Reflection and Final Assignment Reflection on Major Assignment #5

During the second week of the group action projects, I asked students to complete a mid-process reflection so I could get a picture of student willingness toward social action and also gauge the extent to which the current project was encouraging that interest.

The final assignment reflection, then, that followed the project was a continuation of students’ recursive dialogue with their individual progress. Because students were actually engaged in the transformative experience of enacting social action projects during this unit, I was specifically concerned with the evolution of their practices, the understanding of their practices, and the situations in which they practice, as noted above.
Major Assignment #6 (Weeks 16-17):
Semester Portfolio

As is common in all ISUComm Foundation Communication courses, students created end of the semester process/product portfolios representing the multimodal communication skills they had developed over the course of the semester. Because, as the ISUComm Student Guide insists, learning to communicate is “an on-going process of knowledge acquisition, practice, and thoughtful analysis,” the developmental portfolio provides a place for students to gauge what they’ve learned and what that learning means (52). For the end of the semester reflection, I asked students to comment on their understanding of social action and discuss the extent to which they’d be likely to participate in similar actions in the future.
4. Results and Analysis

My approach to analyzing the work of participants in this study follows a qualitative design of allowing themes to emerge from reflections and writing samples. This formal analysis was written post-study; however, due to the recursive spiral of the PAR design, the study necessitated analysis concurrent with course developments, allowing for reconceptualization, planning, and intervention on the part of the researcher. To guide the reader through any process changes during my action research, my discussion will note how and why particular classroom events shaped the direction of course assignments or activities. Also, because one of my primary research questions concerns delivery methods for a social action curriculum, I will devote sections of my discussion (and the following chapter) to understanding how the course focus on written, oral, visual and electronic communication was enhanced by the projects and vice versa.

The questions guiding my analysis are directly related to my research questions. I’m specifically concerned with determining the extent to which student concepts of social action and agency changed over the course of the semester. My guiding questions of analysis are as follows:

- How did students’ concepts of social action change over the course of the semester?
- How did students’ willingness to take local action change over the course of the semester?
• What role did the focus on local place play in the development of the two concepts (social action, agency) above?

All student data will be situated in the context of the specific assignments they relate to. When necessary, I will pair any decontextualized student reflections with observational narratives specific to a student’s individual experience in the course. All student samples used in this study will be attributed to pseudonyms in order to preserve confidentiality for participants.

The structure of the analysis will follow the chronological structure of the course. I will first identify major themes from the initial questionnaire on concepts related to social action and agency. With the analysis of each new data instrument, I will discuss any student changes in light of Donna Qualley’s reflexive “turn.” Doing so will provide a clearer picture of the specific moments throughout the semester when student language of social action displayed some kind of transformation. Also, in light of socially situated views of agency (Cooper, Geisler, Giddens, Herndl and Licona, Miller), these short stops along the path of the semester might illustrate moments when students seized on the opening of communicative space, thereby “experiencing” agency (Obviously, most students will not be using terms such as “agency”; these ideas are inferred from the triangulation of different data instruments).

In the next chapter, I will discuss themes drawn from end of semester reflections, contextualizing them in the work preceding.
Beginning-of-Semester Questionnaire (Week 1):

The initial questionnaire of the semester was designed to collect notions of social action and agency unadulterated by course lessons to gain a sense of student understanding at the outset of the course. As can be seen in Appendix A, the original questionnaire contained three questions. The two questions I decided to pull data from were numbers #1 and #3:

1. In a few sentences for each term, please describe how you understand the following terms: “place,” “environment,” and “social action.”

3. In one or two paragraphs, please discuss to what extent you see yourself as someone capable of social action. To what extent does communication play a role in this?

Because the student interests that emerged over the course of the semester weren’t concerned specifically with “environment,” I looked only at how students understood “social action,” “place,” and their perceived capability of social action. As I read responses from the initial questionnaire, three major themes emerged from the beginning-of-semester questionnaire regarding student understanding of social action. Because the willingness to engage in social action is partially dependent on how one understands social action, my emergent themes account for that relationship. The three common themes evident in the beginning-of-semester reflections are as follows:
1. “I know what social action is, but I don’t identify as a social actor.” (17 Students)
2. “I’m willing to get involved in social action when part of a group.” (11 Students)
3. “I don’t know what social action is.” (16 Students)

Theme #1: “I know what social action is, but I don’t identify as a social actor.”

The student responses catalogued under this theme were written in a way that displayed understanding of social action as some kind of act that worked to better the community or place where an actor is situated. Only a few students identified social action within a “radical activist” frame. These students, though understanding the basic idea behind social action, resisted this kind of activity as being incongruent with their identities or as something unavailable to them as citizens.

Crystal, an outgoing sophomore from a small Iowa town, explained her relationship with social action using the “leader/follower” frame:

Social action is taking a stand for something and getting something done in a community setting...I consider myself more as a follower than a leader; not saying that I'm not capable of social action, but I'd rather not make waves by starting something.

In her response, Crystal is apprehensive about taking action due to possible consequences or “waves” that might result. Most students whose responses fell under this theme also discussed a reticence to position themselves in leadership roles.
Another student, Laurel, whose development I will gauge at the end of this study, identified social action in a “service” frame, but like most in this category noted her shyness:

A social action is something which the community does or an individual in that community does to help the community or a person in the community out... I would like to get more involved in the community but also find it hard for me to put myself out there because I am a very shy person. Since I am a shy person it is hard for me to communicate that I would like to get more involved. Maybe if I get better at communication it will be easier for me to help out the community and others.

Because Laurel’s unwillingness to get involved in community social action hinges on her insecurities with communication, tracking her development at points throughout the study will provide insight into not only how a view of social action can change, but also how communication skills learned in a multimodal classroom are directly related to one person’s ability to see herself as capable of action.

*Theme #2: “I’m willing to get involved with social action when part of a group”*

Much like students identified under the previous theme, students in theme two also displayed understanding of the meaning of social actions. However, their willingness to engage in such activity was contingent on their involvement in a larger organization or community group. Many students in this category mentioned previous experience with service work completed through schools, churches, and extracurricular activities. Sheryl, a sophomore, discussed her organizational affiliations at Iowa State University:
I love doing volunteer work and for me that is social action to solve many different problems. As a sorority member I am involved in philanthropy called Make a Wish. This helps kids with one last wish. To involve me in this they showed us a video explaining the foundation.

In Sheryl’s experience, social action is primarily achieved through the authority and groundwork of a charity organization. The volunteerism needed by an organization like Make-a-Wish provides the space for students like Sheryl, who is already part of the partnering group, the sorority, to get involved. Sheryl’s capability to act is directly measured by the extent to which her sorority collective decides to act.

**Theme #3: “I don’t know what social action is.”**

A number of students gave elaborate answers explaining their capability to act, noting personal qualities like determination, role modeling, and work ethic. However, when it came to simply stating what they believed social action to be, their ideas were considerably less clear. As noted at the beginning of this section, students’ willingness to act is in part dependent upon their understanding of action. Though some students in this category discussed their status as capable social actors, their inability to articulate what that meant made me include their responses under theme #3.

Besides not articulating a meaning of social action, many students discussed their relationships with “society” or the “greater community,” concepts so vague they are elusive, distant realities. Kent illustrated this divide between the individual and the audience:
I can see myself as someone capable of great social action. There are many resources at my disposal that would allow me to communicate quickly and easily with society. I'm still slightly unsure of what social action is exactly so I cannot give a very detailed answer to this question.

Though Kent’s response displays a willingness to do something, his limited understanding of social action and audience seems to hinder the possibility of action. Kent’s response confirms Jeff Smith’s concerns about students’ inability to read the world and understand the social situations in which they exist. The comments about communicating with “society” model an inability to see the very real, tangible choices available to students (204).

**Visual Argument of Social Action (Week 2)**

The student responses to the initial questionnaire provided brief glimpses of how students perceived their ability to act based on how they understood social action. Though valuable, the individual responses didn’t provide enough detail for me as the researcher to determine where the class was in their understanding of action. Because the ISUComm Courses utilize multimodal communication pedagogy, I thought it would be valuable to have students use visual language to make an argument about what social action looked like to them. During one of our first meetings in the computer lab, I asked students to individually find an image on the Internet that exemplified what social action was to them. For students whose written literacy may not have been developed enough to provide detailed answers
to the questionnaire, this activity gave them a chance in the visual mode to make a more communicative argument.

Not only was the visual argument activity a chance for students to continue thinking about their understanding of social action; the photographs they emailed to me would later be used in a PowerPoint discussion following the seven-week blogging assignment. In that discussion, we used their photographs to discuss the differences and similarities between their initial constructions of action and the arguments about action that the BWH presented.

The common visual arguments that emerged from student responses described social action as charity, as volunteering, as activist protest, as social movements, and as abstractions such as cooperation and diversity. Many of these photographs followed the same definitions of social action that students put forth in the beginning of the term. For example, if the students had framed social action as service, they tended to choose pictures of food drives or mentoring (figures 1 and 2 below).

![Figure 1: Social Action as Service.](image1)

![Figure 2: Social Action as charity.](image2)
For these students, action as community-centered work appeared somewhat accessible. For instance, with the charity photos, there was a clear bias towards action that didn’t involve dialogue between community members, but simply a transfer of material goods from one group to the next. Though a picture can’t necessarily show a subject’s critical consciousness, the charity-framed photos tended to ignore the larger social problems that created the initial need for the charity work. As Bickford and Reynolds state, seeing social action as charity avoids asking the “why” of the problem and defaults to asking “how” (231).

Those students who visualized social action through pictures of activism (picket signs, members of subcultures) or social movements (ex. Civil Rights, Women’s Suffrage) tended to be the same students who had provided vague descriptions of their willingness to engage in action (as well as confused descriptions of who their audience would be if they did). An example of this can be seen in the comparison of Kent’s original questionnaire response and his visual argument.

Kent’s original comment about social action illustrated his understanding of social action as something that engaged “society,” the large elusive public. Even then, Kent was still unsure what social action meant in his own life. The photograph he chose confirms the claim of Bickford and Reynolds that many students see social actors in stereotypical activist roles, as “heroes, courageous and dedicated in ways that are impossible to emulate” (238). Kent’s image (figure 3 on next page), the iconic “tank man” staring down a line of Chinese tanks during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, is symbolic of the distance between how students see themselves and how they see social action existing in the world. Temporally, Kent’s image
Figure 3: Kent’s foreign representation of “social action.”

captures a moment that happened before any student in the class had been born, thereby constructing social action as distant in time. Culturally and ideologically, late 1980s China represents an experience completely foreign to most native students. Geographically, the “place” of Tiananmen Square (I realize place is a product of the previous three categories of culture, ideology, and time) has very few similarities to the local place of Iowa State or the Ames community. When situating social action in a foreign “place”, international or not, students are co-constructing social action as equally foreign.

Other students in the third category, “I don’t know what social action is,” also used abstract visuals that provided equally distant (in their cases, vague) descriptions of what social action could be. Photographs of hands holding hands as well as stylized iconography of the planet earth were popular. Even Crystal, though
not in the third category, used a combination of hands and the earth to show a
global effort towards alleviating world hunger. In terms of accessibility, students
who chose the universally symbolic images (hands, globe, diverse skin colors) didn’t
seem to have a concrete grasp on how they themselves saw social action as possible.

For those students whose original questionnaires indicated a willingness to
get involved in action through groups and organizations, there was a clear
continuation in the visual arguments of concrete, service-framed actions. In fact,
only nine of the 38 photos submitted (some failed to complete the assignment)
depict concrete actions that would be available to students in the place of ISU and
Ames. My early-semester analysis was that the majority of students were coming to
this class with an experientially othered view of social action. In other words, though
students might have seen activists and social movements as part of our larger
societal reality, they didn’t see themselves as inhabiting these positions in their local
realities. Students’ ability to show social action added a new dimension to their initial
definitions. If I had simply asked students to verbally express arguments about
social action, my ability to plan lessons that made action a reality for them would
have been significantly limited. In fact, the mid-semester analysis of the social action
photos provided insights for planning the place-based action proposal unit. The
next activity and data collection was designed to help students construct social
action as an activity congruent with their personal and local realities.

Better World Blogs: Interview Reflection (Week 9)

As described in the previous chapter, students worked for seven weeks on a
blog assignment that corresponded with their readings from the BWH. The majority
of blog entries were discussions of each of the seven foundations for a better world in which they summarized the foundation and then provided realistic actions that could be taken on campus or in town to address the problems illuminated in their reading. Following these seven blog entries and preceding their work on their Assignment #4, a researched proposal for a place-based action, the students were able to have a conversation with the co-author of the BWH, Brett Johnson. Following the conversation with Professor Johnson, students reflected on the experience. This section of the chapter discusses those student reflections in light of my research questions and focuses specifically on any cues that experiences with the book and conversations with the author opened up possibilities for students to “transform” their “limiting situations” of inaction (Freire 49).

Overwhelmingly, the majority of the class reflected positively on their conversation with Professor Johnson. I was surprised to read how many students entered the classroom that day expecting the author to be “some old guy who writes books” or a “stuffy man in a bowtie.” Though not everyone specifically shared this stereotypical notion of the pretentious academic, many did remark on Johnson’s “down-to-earth” and “realistic” persona. In fact, the “realism” conveyed in Johnson’s ethos (he’s in his mid-thirties and wore a t-shirt and jeans for the discussion) was one of the most persuasive factors in his presentation of his book’s history, his ideas about social action, and his examples of student actions he’s witnessed. Elaborating on Johnson’s realistic approach, Brent discussed his initial resistance to Johnson’s book and but then shared his enthusiasm for Johnson’s call to start small with social action projects:
Although this book has its ups and downs, and so far my whole view of this book has been a very pessimistic one, that shouldn’t be enough to stop you from caring about something important to you… I had the pleasure of talking with one of the authors of this book and to say the least he left me feeling inspired and confident… This idea of taking such huge problems like ecological change and sustainability and shrinking them into small everyday obstacles allows people to make these problems personal and real, rather than feeling helpless and overwhelmed with the grandness of these problems.

To help illustrate his message of realistic, local actions, Johnson shared examples of his own attempts (and set-backs) with social action projects, as well as examples of student projects that have been carried out on college campuses. Not only did students see that actions were most successful when kept small, but many remarked on how Johnson persuaded them to see social action as “not radical” or synonymous with “activist” roles. Brenda said she learned that “in order to successfully mobilize people, [social actions] should be low-cost, do-able, easy and the solutions should be able to be fully integrated into the reader’s already existing values and daily life.” Brenda recognized in Professor Johnson’s anecdotes the necessity for actions framed in a way that is synonymous with peoples’ lifestyles and value sets.

In the above excerpts, the students reflect on how important considerations of audience needs are for small local actions to be successful. In fact, many students were attuned to Johnson’s discussion of rhetorical considerations. This reflection assignment was the first time in the semester that I observed students actively identifying the connection between rhetorical strategies of rhetors we’d discussed during analyses and the persuasive strategies Johnson prescribed for action projects.
In his response below, Donald, verbalizes how Johnson’s talk helped him see the importance of organizing his action proposal (the students had already been briefed on the requirements of Assignment #4):

The talk also gave me some pointers that can be used in my own paper. Such as using problems as a way to hook my audience. I can then show them a way to solve the problem and persuade them to do something about it.

It seems students were quite taken by the novelty of an outside speaker who could show how the rhetorical concepts they learned in a communication classroom were transferrable to the creation of local actions. Many students remarked on the great advice Johnson shared about organizing an argument for the action proposal assignment. Even though we’d constantly discussed organization and rhetorical appeals in class, it was Johnson’s straightforward framing of the strategies that grabbed the students’ attention.

Though students had been working for the previous seven weeks generating realistic action ideas to address campus problems, the reflections on the interview with Brett Johnson showed the first hints of enthusiasm for the projects. Johnson’s matter-of-fact approach seemed to turn students on to the possibility that they had the capacity to enact projects like those in the book. Also, the “normalcy” of Johnson’s persona allowed some students to “co-construct” a model of a change agent. The next section of analysis will look at student reflections as they relate to their place-based action proposal papers.
Assignment #4 – Place-Based Action Proposal (Weeks 8-11)

The Place-Based Action Proposal was the first major assignment that asked students to spend a significant amount of time researching and developing a proposal for a realistic action that could address a problem on campus or in Ames and use the multimodal communication skills learned in English 250. During a four-week period, students developed their papers through multiple revisions and peer-response workshops. Following the due date for the papers, students composed 250-word synopses of their place-based action proposals for their classmates to review and vote on. This section will analyze the language and the content of these proposals to interpret the degree to which the actions focus on local needs and show an awareness of actual audiences for the proposals. I will also discuss how students’ views of social action are represented at this point in the semester. If any of the proposals necessitate additional context, I will provide examples of work from the student’s researched proposal paper.

The four significant themes that grew from my reading of the 44 action synopses illuminate students’ understanding of the relationship between social action and their local place. These themes are not mutually exclusive, as the discussion reveals:

- Social action as charity
- Social action as promoting behavior change
- Social action as local awareness of a global problem
- Social action directed at generic audience
Social Action as Charity

Of the 44 place-based action synopses, eight student projects clearly framed their projects as charities. The themes for these types of charity projects ranged from food and clothing drives to eyeglass donations. Designed to take place in both campus locations and in the storefronts of community merchants, these projects were modeled on simple charity drives that students had either experienced or read about during their research. The communication component proposed with these charity projects was often either a poster or flier. While these charity-themed actions did often provide support for a local place, the student authors neglected to see the connection between their actions and larger social problems. Britney proposed a food and clothing drive to benefit the ACCESS women’s shelter in Ames. In the research that preceded the synopsis, Britney related a personal connection with the shelter:

Every year my sorority holds two philanthropies and all of our proceeds go to the ACCESS shelter in Ames. Last spring, I was privileged enough to be able to go to the actual safe house. The location is highly confidential for obvious security reasons. It was incredible to be able to help renovate the house so that it offered its residents all that it could.

Britney’s individual experience through her sorority is a clear motivation for this action and reflects worries Herzberg (1997) and Bickford and Reynolds (2002) have about service-learning absent of critical literacy education. Due in part to Britney’s previous experience in the sorority charity activity, it seems her proposal is blind to the larger problem of women’s shelters: “What creates the need for women’s shelters?” Though Britney’s and others’ charity-focused projects also attempted to
provide awareness for the existence of non-profits in the Ames community, they lacked attention to the behaviors that were causing the need for these organizations in the first place.

Additionally, the charity project proposals all shared a lack of attention to specific audiences. These students designed their arguments around the logic that because something is a problem, everyone will care. Often, as was the case with Brittney, students’ personal experience with the charity seemed to create an inflated sense of audience appeal that blocked out attention to actual proposal audience needs.

**Social Action as Promoting Behavior Change**

Of the 44 place-based project proposals, twenty-one proposed projects were geared towards creating behavioral changes within the intended audience or institutional change at the university. Topics for these proposed projects included a redesigned contraceptive distribution plan at ISU, simple living advice for students, converting a campus café to fair trade coffee, informational signs promoting benefits of local foods in the cafeterias, among others. Because behavioral change happens within an intended audience during a rhetorical act, students who conceived of these types of action projects seemed to have a clearer sense of whom they would be communicating with and the kinds of contacts they would need to make within the institution and community.

Though some projects were too large to attempt with only six weeks left in the semester, most students were confident that at least the process behind their actions would have time to develop. Lindsey created a proposal for an Ames and
ISU Clothing Swap to take place at a campus building or local business. The clothing swap event was intended to connect with the BWH foundation of ecological sustainability. Lindsey’s project clearly attempted to show how a small action could address larger questions of sustainability. The proposal was also successful at directly identifying the audience and explaining the changed behavior that would result from such a project. Lindsey wrote:

I am addressing the issue of recycling and hyper consumerism at Iowa State University. Instead of trading or recycling clothing, a lot of students go out and buy new. I am proposing to make an event that is guaranteed to make a clothing swap fun and very eventful…This will be a great opportunity for students on a budget to get great clothes and socialize with other students in a fun atmosphere.

The communication project included in this proposal was the creation of a poster that advertised the event and also face-to-face interviews with campus officials who could provide support for the project. Lindsey identified specific locations where the posters would target her intended audience.

Students whose proposals were geared towards behavioral change also had a strong sense for how the proposed action connected with larger social problems. They were able to identify, often citing the BWH, how the proposed action would both help change behavioral patterns, and create awareness for issues like social justice and community worth. I will continue a discussion of these projects in the next section.
Social Action as Local Awareness

The previous section revealed most students whose action proposals addressed a behavioral change also showed some attempt to raise awareness for global/systemic social problems. Of the 44 student proposals submitted, 18 explicitly stated their intention to raise awareness for a global problem. I saw “awareness raising” as a significant theme for projects in this category, because it demonstrates that students were not simply recognizing their actions as individual good deeds, but smaller parts of a larger process of transforming the public understanding of various societal problems. The student example that I examine in this section is from Laurel, the student from the beginning of the chapter who connected her shyness with her unwillingness to take action in her community.

Laurel had spoken with me throughout the composing process of her proposal and showed sincere interest in crafting a persuasive piece. Like all other students, she knew that her action proposal could be chosen by the class for further work in the next assignment (Assignment #5 – Place-Based Action Project). She was interested in creating a proposal that could be feasible for a student group, but also fit within the time constraints of a semester that was quickly making its way toward winter break. Laurel’s proposed action was to create a flyer and cafeteria table-tents that advertised local stores in the Ames community that provided great gift ideas for the holiday season. Laurel’s proposal framed the action as addressing a larger systemic problem:

The problem that this proposal is addressing is the loss of connection and lack of compassion towards our local communities. I propose that a brochure be made that has local stores’ information who give back to the community in
one way or another. The stores would be local stores and not chain stores like McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and Pizza Hut. The brochures would have multiple local store names and information along with some of the main products that they sell which most students or community’s members would buy. The brochures would also have information on them explaining the fact that if we give to our local economy it will give back to us.

Students, such as Laurel, often included in their proposals a statement of how their actions would benefit both the local place of Ames or ISU and how it would address a larger problem. In Laurel’s case, her proposal was concerned with a “lack of compassion towards our communities.” The background for this claim was supported in her research paper by newspaper sources, as well as secondary sources listed in the BWH, providing some evidence for the benefits of the book’s role of shaping students’ understanding of social action.

**Social Action Directed at a Generic Audience**

Audience recognition is often a problem for writers in foundation communication courses. Fifteen of the 44 action proposals lacked a significant understanding of the intended audience. The two most significant problems in audience recognition were generality of the action and magnitude of the action.

In the first sub-section, “Social action as charity,” I discussed the link between charity-type action projects and student inability to identify audience. A similar obstacle to this project came from those students whose ideas were simply too large and too complicated to undertake. Clark was interested in the topic of converting dirty coal plants to biomass burning plants. He designed a proposal calling on
students to take action and demand that Iowa State University convert its coal plant to biomass. Clark’s inability to articulate specifics of how the plan would be enacted was directly connected to the inaccessible magnitude of the plan. He writes:

If the students of Iowa State and the surrounding community express their concern in any form to school officials, and state officials about the pollution that is being created by burning the hundreds of thousands pounds of coal being burned, along with the economic and clean alternative energy forms it will force the school to begin looking into the alternatives. Conversion of the current coal plant to a biomass plant would pay for itself in the first few years of operation because it burns waste generated by nature and humans.

Clark’s paper represents a number of student papers where the topic was certainly of interest to the student, but he/she had a difficult time paring down the problem into a small, realistic proposal. In a way, the magnitude of Clark’s project parallels the problem encountered by many students who designed charity projects. Clark’s focus was on what was being burned at the coal plant. A way to address the larger systemic problem would be to ask why coal was being used for energy production.

Following this project, students were placed into groups to create and possibly enact the social action projects proposed by a few of their classmates. The following section analyzes the mid-process and end-of-project questionnaire responses.
Assignment #5 – Place-Based Action Project (Weeks 12 and 15)

As discussed in the methodology chapter, Assignment #5 was the culmination of both the seven weeks of blogging on local campus actions as well as the place-based action proposal discussed above. Once students had completed their researched proposals, the various projects were put up for a vote in each class. The top five projects in each class were paired with student groups of four or five people. In groups, students spent the duration of the unit creating the physical communication products and possibly attempting to enact the action that had been proposed by their group leader in the previous assignment.

To focus on students’ experiences during the process of this group project, I asked students to respond to two reflection questionnaires. One was a mid-process questionnaire attempting to get a picture of student willingness toward social action and also gauge the extent to which the current project was encouraging that interest. The second questionnaire was a post-project reflection that asked students to reflect on the project’s successes and struggles, how their status as students affected their processes, and what they learned about the place of Iowa State University during the process.

Mid-Process Questionnaire on Assignment #5

Of the 41 (three students did not submit the questionnaire) students who completed the mid-process questionnaire during the second week of the action project, 16 indicated that they would not be likely to pursue social action work outside of the classroom after the semester was over. The general reactions that emerged from these students were:


- “I don’t have the time.”
- “I’d rather join a charitable organization.”
- “I’m not an activist. I’d rather utilize my communication skills in my job.”

The remaining 25 students indicated definite likelihood of wanting to try these kinds of action projects in the future. The general reactions that emerged from these students who looked favorably on the project were:

- “The process has shown me the small actions I didn’t know were possible.”
- “I’m willing to create projects such as this if I have a supportive group.”
- “If the action stems from a personal interest, I’ll be likely to act.”

**Mid-Process: Students Less Likely to Act**

Of the students who showed low likelihood of pursuing social action endeavors in the future, the most common reaction was some form of, “I don’t have the time.” These students shared a conceptualization of action that was similar to the other two groups of students who answered, that they weren’t “activists” or that they’d prefer being part of a charitable organization. All three groups conceptualized social action as something that happens outside of academic and professional life, thus requiring extra time and/or the ownership of an “activist” persona.

Two of the students who responded with some level of resistance to civic engagement came from the same group. Crystal, mentioned earlier, and Emily were co-contributors to the group project led by Laurel. The plan was for the creation of fliers and table tents that would advertise the benefits of shopping locally during the holiday season. When students submitted the mid-process questionnaires in the
second week, Laurel’s group was having difficulty getting support from Dining Services to allow the placement of the fliers and tents. Crystal, who was having time conflicts during the first two weeks, was unable to keep steady involvement with the group. On her willingness to take action in the future, Crystal responded, “I don’t necessarily have a lot of time, but in the past I would do things like volunteer.”

Emily, who had expressed frustrations during the first weeks with accessibility of dining staff, responded, “I do not really see myself doing more projects like this outside of class, mainly because it is not my type of approach to helping.”

Both students used service-framed terms such as “volunteer” and “helping” to describe action. This service/charity mindset was common in those students who discussed their time or professional goals as conflicts that would keep them from taking action. Because students with charity and service orientations tend to see social action as product-focused, the sometimes unpredictable process of the group action project could have most likely caused frustration for the individual students. Considering Qualley’s discussion on engaging the “other,” when framed as charity or service, social action gets placed outside of the students’ accessible reality and continues to act as the “stranger experience” (Qualley 9-10). Though a few students in the “likely to act in the future” category framed action as involvement with a charitable act, most discussed it as something that could be incorporated into their individual experiences.

**Mid-Process: Students Likely to Act in the Future**

The most common response from students who felt that they would be likely to act in the future was an explanation of how the process benefitted them in some
way. For some students, the group process was most beneficial and would be an integral part of their future lives as social agents. These students often spoke of the group dialogue as the key to refining their ideas. Also, because of the mid-process group sharing sessions that I moderated during our class periods, students were able to pull ideas from other groups who found effective ways to contact campus staff or communicate with a dorm floor, for example. Josie worked in a group whose project was a simple living campaign that encouraged students to slow down and avoid certain unhealthy stresses of college life. Regarding group work, she stated:

The most beneficial aspect of this project has been my group. They have motivated me to come up with good ideas, and they let me know when my ideas weren’t that great. Group projects are a good way to get things done…If I find a group that would help me, I would definitely do a project that could make a change.

Josie’s group reported strong work ethic from each member and was also fortunate to have a group leader who was extremely organized. Those students who were in well-functioning groups, but did not act as the leader of the group, were most likely to suggest that their future actions would involve group collaboration of some sort.

An equally common student response on process noted how the project itself opened possibilities for students to attempt an action. Andrea led a group project to discuss with the Student Disability Resources (SDR) office the possibility of creating a social group that could better integrate students with disabilities into normalized social activities. Though Andrea’s group project was still in the process stage by the end of the semester, her interaction with university professors and SDR staff members was a motivating experience:
I may not get the organization approved and started that I am hoping for but I definitely do not feel like it is out of my reach... Apparently all I needed was for it to be assigned to me in an English class... I definitely see myself doing projects like this outside of a college course! I wish [I was] outside of [school] now that I have my inspiration, because I need the time! Now that I have come to realize that it is not that hard, the worse that can happen is being told no and all you can do is tweak it and try again.

Andrea, though seeing that her commitments to school were taking her away from this project, reflected that making use of the opportunities available through this class was not as intimidating as she had expected. Because she was able to try on the “stranger experience” of social action in a safe setting, her fear of failure was transformed into an understanding toward the process of social change (Qualley 10). Also, the groups’ utilization of the modes available to them opened up opportunities to advance their action.

Recognizing early on that the process of their action project was going to be more significant than an initial product, Andrea’s group decided to utilize their oral communication skills and unveil their project to special education faculty and the SDR director through an informal presentation (which they documented with written transcripts). The dialogism inherent in oral communication opened a conversation with the director of the SDR that allowed both parties to shape or, as Andrea remarked, “tweak,” the action together. Had this project been assigned in the written mode only, this co-construction of the specific social action with the SDR Director may not have been as likely, thereby erasing Andrea’s notion that revising a plan could bring about success.
The third most common response from students was that they’d be most likely to attempt social action if they were passionate about the issue. Rose, a member of Lindsey’s clothing swap group, often spoke in class about how much she enjoyed working on a project that she was actually interest in. In her response, she explained how the project showed her that attempting these kinds of projects was a real possibility:

It has never really crossed my mind that I could be an integral part of a campus wide betterment project. I feel much more empowered already…If I have another great idea or if given the opportunity to participate in the planning and execution of an even of similar magnitude, I’m all in! Like I’ve said before, this has empowered me and made me realize I do have a lot to give back. It is good for anyone to do something like this; it’s giving us ownership of a better community.

Rose comments that she’d never realized a project like this was a possibility. As she told me in classroom conversations, she never knew that simply having interest in something and combining that with useful communication skills could allow for the successful development of a social action project. Using words such as “empowerment” and “ownership,” Rose’s comments demonstrate a sense that connecting interest with action may be that push that illustrates to students that “arguing something might be worthwhile” (Smith 204).

After students submitted the mid-process questionnaire, they spent the next three weeks working on their action projects in groups and also completed audience analyses individually. The next section summarizes and analyzes the reflection questionnaire following Assignment #5 – Place Based Action Project.
Final Reflection Questionnaire on Assignment #5

The final student reflections followed the submission of all group projects. My intent behind the final reflection on the action project was to discern the extent to which the action project provided the possibility for students to take agency. I was also interested in the degree that the place of the university played a role in the perceived success or failure of these projects. At the point of the due date, there were five student groups who were in the process of enacting their projects on campus; the other five groups either decided they were done or stopped because of logistical problems. Regardless of where each group was in the process, all groups submitted their materials.

Of those students whose reflections conveyed that the project experience had provided possibilities to take agency and also that the campus place was a significant influence, the following themes emerged most frequently:

• The individual’s sense of agency hinged on the opportunity to work with someone in authority (campus official or faculty member).

• Knowledge of the place and student audience allowed for a clear recognition of audience.

For those students who didn’t find the experience empowering or reported set-backs with the project, the following themes were most common:

• Institutional constraints on the placement of posters/visual arguments.

• If not the originator of the idea, student felt the project lacked critical thinking.

For this questionnaire, I do not have a tally for those who felt empowered and those who didn’t. The questions on the questionnaire didn’t lend themselves to an easily
quantifiable figure as previous activities with singular purposes did. Nevertheless, student growth will be gauged in the next chapter by comparing initial questionnaires with end-of-semester reflections.

The students who reported feeling empowered by this project often remarked that contact with university staff or officials infused their projects with a credibility they may not have had on their own. Michelle was a member of a group that created food guides intended to encourage the consumption of the local food items in two campus cafeterias. This group made an email contact with the director of the campus-based local food program, “Farm to ISU,” and was invited to present their project in a meeting. As a consequence, the group scheduled several meetings with the director throughout the rest of the semester. Not only was the director willing to provide counsel on the project, but he allowed the group to use the Farm to ISU logo on their publication. Remarkng on how this affected her action experience, Michelle wrote:

Getting [the director] to help us on this project was great because then we got to use a more recognized logo which gave us more credibility, allowing us as students to better get our ideas out there for students.

Michelle’s reflection shows a realization of the power that communicating from the position of someone else’s authority can provide. Though not specifically articulated as “agency,” Michelle demonstrated an understanding of agentive voice that opposes the traditional notion that to take agency, people simply exercise their will and then take action to change the situation (Flower 54). In order to effect change in students’ eating habits, Michelle felt that their group needed to identify a voice of authority within the institution and speak from that position. In terms of Herndl and
Licona’s (2007) theory on the shifting space of agency, Michelle’s group took agency when the possibility (opened by the class project), the time (made available with coordinated schedules), and access to the authority (due to positions as students within the same institution as the director) intersected and opened a temporary space for communicative action. I would argue, based on a thorough reading of course reflections, that the majority of students who found value in communicating from established positions of authority continue to see themselves as the originators of the agency, that their individual choices to act were what ultimately manifested action.

A second theme that emerged from those students who claimed this project opened up agentive possibility for them was that an experiential knowledge of place and audience was crucial to the development of their projects. Students remarked that audience knowledge allowed for appropriate choice of media (Facebook page versus poster), language choice (low style vs. high), location of physical action (the clothing swap group decided a campus place that welcomed high student traffic would be most successful), and time of action (some avoided enacting projects directly before finals week), etc. Britney, a student from the clothing swap group, explained the benefit of audience availability:

I think being a student was more beneficial than anything when it came to this project. It seemed like we knew all the right people to contact, and also, I think Jeff’s Pizza was more likely to help us out because this was a student-run event…We were also able to reach out to a lot of people through Facebook and word of mouth on campus.

Knowledge of one’s place allows for recognition of problems. Also, as Britney
recognized, knowledge of place is integral when attempting to sway others toward the change one intends. Place determines audience and communication conventions. Groups that used Facebook as their communicative media recognized the conventional authority of social networking technology within the place of a university campus.

Though many found the place-based action project provided a chance to take agency on their campus and in their community, other students encountered significant barriers in the creation of their projects. The most common barrier for students who remarked on their inability to feel empowered were institutional restrictions on the locations of various action projects. Students who reported this difficulty were primarily from groups whose projects revolved around a single awareness poster. The issues that these student groups addressed were consumer lifestyles, troop support, recycling awareness, and student debt. Sheryl, a student mentioned earlier in the chapter, reflected on poster restrictions.

The only thing that is hard to do as students is get the posters up. If we had an adult figure or organization, I feel we could have the posters up by now. While recognizing the impact of structural restrictions, Sheryl also recognized the benefit of speaking with the established authority of a student organization or faculty member. From my observations during class, student groups were less likely to sense possibility with their actions if they focused all of their efforts on a single communication product, namely a poster. These groups seemed so focused on the physical product that they avoided the necessary deliberation about the logistics of the plan. When it came time to enact the project and these groups ran into barriers, they didn’t pursue other options.
The other significant theme that emerged from the students who didn’t feel empowered by the project was that the group work erased any ownership of the action. Because only ten students’ projects were used for the place-based action project, all other students were assigned to groups consistent with their academic and personal interests and their choices. Because some students’ interests were so dissimilar to the other proposed projects in the class, it was difficult to find a perfect fit for them. Sophia, whose proposal assignment was an awareness campaign about local Iowa politics, wasn’t completely interested in recycling locator maps that her group produced. She reflected on her qualms with the project format:

Being put into groups, we were never really asked to consider why [our group leader’s] problem developed. The group work was mostly executing someone else’s plan, which didn’t force me to think critically, or at all, about the issue...Working on a plan I had no part in made me lose interest in the project. Since the plan was already outlined, most of the group work we did was completing a checklist. More discussion would have been appropriate.

While other groups such as Lindsey’s (clothing swap) and Michelle’s (food information signs) changed a number of the original plans to account for the strengths of the group members and institutional barriers, Sophia’s group enacted the original proposal written by their group leader. Regardless of the degree of change from planning to development, Sophia’s comment illustrates a concern common for a number of students. If the group leader does all of the research, there is very little incentive to further investigate the cause of the problem that the students are attempting to address. This point will be discussed further in the final chapter on conclusions and implications.
In the next chapter, I will synthesize the results of the data into meta-
reflections about the process of the semester. Comparing early-semester
questionnaires with end of semester reflections, I’ll discuss the extent to which this
multimodal communication course facilitated student experiences toward social
action and developed a willingness to act on local issues of concern. Additionally,
I’ll discuss the transferability of this study to future composition classrooms while
also suggesting changes to my original course design.
5. Conclusion

This chapter will synthesize the results of the data collection and elaborate on any significant points of analysis stated in the previous chapter. Using the responses from Data Collection #6, the first half of this chapter discusses general changes within students and touches on major themes that emerged in these end-of-semester reflections. The second half of the chapter will restate the research questions and consider the degree to which these questions were answered by the social action semester. I will also discuss limitations of this study, transferability of course projects, and possibilities for further academic inquiry.

The social action semester concluded with students completing reflections on their individual definitions of social action as well as statements about how the course projects affected their willingness to take action in the future. To provide a glimpse of the changes between the beginning of the semester and the end, I’ve listed the difference in “likelihood of action” in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point in Semester</th>
<th>Likelihood to take social action</th>
<th>No change, but still willing to take action</th>
<th>No likelihood to take social action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection #1</td>
<td>11 Students</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>33 Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection #6</td>
<td>31 Students</td>
<td>11 Students</td>
<td>2 Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Comparison between Data Collections #1 and #6
As shown above, there was a large increase in the number of students who, after taking the course, were more willing to take social action in their communities. Because the focus of this course was not to transform mainstream students into flag-burning activists, but instead active citizens, any individual reflection showing that the student experienced a “modest rethinking” of themselves capable and willing to engage in social action was counted as positive growth. Of those students who reported likelihood to take action in their local communities, eleven reported that the class had simply reinforced their willingness to get involved in civic actions, but didn’t necessarily change any preconceptions they brought to the course. Also, the two students who reported that they were not likely to take action, did, however, report that they would still be willing to give to charities.

Of those students who reported positive change in their willingness to take action, the themes below were the most common in their reflections:

- “Social action is not a big idea that has to change the world (learned from the Better World Handbook and Assignment #4: Place-Based Action Proposal).”
- “The group work gave me confidence.”
- “Learning the communication skills in conjunction with the actions gave me confidence to take action.”
- “The process of trying to take action showed me that I am capable of this work.”

Of those students who reported that the course showed them that social action doesn’t have to be a world-changing idea, most cited the reading of the BWH
or the writing of Assignment #4, Place-Based Action Proposal to be the cause. Sophia commented that Assignment #4 helped her understand that she didn’t necessarily have to rely on others’ ideas in order to be active in her community: “The research paper made me realize that I didn’t necessarily have to seek out a cause or organization to get involved in, but rather, that I could develop a plan by myself.” Because the students were encouraged to keep their projects small, there was a sense among many that they as individuals could give these projects a try. For Rose, the BWH and related class conversations showed her that social action isn’t something that has to be excluded from her daily life:

Through readings and discussions in this class, I have learned that social action does not have to take the place of my activities. It can simply complement them…If you had told me prior to this class that I was going to organize and execute a clothing swap and truly enjoy it, I would have never believed you…Participating in my community has really filled a portion of my life I always felt was missing.

For these students, “social actor” (though they didn’t use this terminology) was clearly reframed as an identity that will now be more comfortable to perform. And as Rose reports, the BWH was part of this transformation. In the first chapter, the authors clearly direct the reader to “identify those actions that you truly believe in and can commit to integrating into your life right now” (Jones, Haenfler, and Johnson xvi). Rose answered this call and found inspiration in a project that coincided with her interests and passions. For other students, this accessibility came from collaborative opportunities.
Of those students who reflected on the benefits of group work, many discussed an increase in confidence. The significance of this increase in confidence is represented in Laurel’s reflections at the beginning of the semester. In “Data Collection #1,” Laurel identified herself as shy and unwilling to take action:

I would like to get more involved in the community but also find it hard for me to put myself out there because I am a very shy person. Since I am a shy person it is hard for me to communicate that I would like to get more involved.

When Laurel’s Place-Based Action Proposal was chosen by her class to be one of the enacted projects, she was instantly situated in a leadership position. As leader of the group, she ran into difficulties obtaining permission to place table tents in cafeterias. Though two students in her group, Crystal and Emily, were discouraged by this barrier, Laurel still found the work to be motivating. Her comment below illustrates the benefit of the in-class, group-sharing forums on her perception of herself as capable of action:

I believe I will be more likely to get involved in social action in my local places...It is easier than I thought to help out and to change something. After seeing all of the projects come together, I do believe that we as students and also myself can make a difference if we try.

What was most interesting about Laurel’s reflection was that the final result of her group’s project didn’t actually reach a public audience. Laurel was realistic about the barriers she encountered, but refused to be deterred. She instead found value in the projects of fellow students. Others reported similar feelings toward the collaborative learning environment, often noting the value of “bouncing ideas” off
one another. As Ignelzi explains, students are more willing to leave their metaphorical “farms” if other learners accompany them on the journey to a new “farm” (13). Laurel’s comments also illustrate an instantiation of a few of the collaborative strategies taught in the “O” realm of the WOVE curriculum: bonding, managing, contextualizing, researching, rehearsing, composing, and reporting (ISUComm Student Guide 39-40). Because students were working within a community of learners who were willing to take that first step into action, many showed appreciation for the “we’re-all-in-this together” tone of the class. And though many students developed confidence through collaboration, others found confidence in the multimodal communication skills they learned throughout the semester.

Those students who discussed the connection between multimodal communication skills and willingness to take action mostly reflected on the variety of tools they had to work with when it came to addressing a real world audience. As Andrea writes, the communication skills she learned allows her to adapt to varying levels of formality:

After taking this course, I will definitely be more likely to engage in social action efforts within my local place because I have learned that one person can make a difference…Learning about the communication methods helped build [my] confidence to communicate an idea with any kind of audience, formal or informal, and that is the foundation to getting a social action shared.

Much like Laurel’s group, Andrea’s group project didn’t result in any formal product; however, the multimodal skills used in the process were the subject of
constant deliberation in her group. Before a meeting with the Director of the Student Disability Resources Office, Andrea’s group created a mock-up poster that was to advertise their proposed social group that advocated for inclusion of students with disabilities in normalized social settings. Because the poster intended to depict a collaborative effort between students without disabilities and students with disabilities, Andrea’s group had to consider visual depictions of disability that respected the audiences they were attempting to serve. Such consideration would not have been an issue had this been a course strictly focused on the written mode. This is not to claim, however, that the written mode is not strongly emphasized in a multimodal class. Lindsey, the creator of the clothing swap, also remarked on the benefit of having to write to community audiences:

My written communication skills have increased and I am more skilled at writing professionally to businesses around Ames. These are some of the skills I feel that will carry on into future classes and my engagement in social action.

Though Lindsey’s submitted project was primarily visual (a poster advertising the event), she wrote dozens of emails and requests to campus officials and community businesses. The blend of the written, oral, visual, and electronic modes showed students the power communication can have in addressing a public audience.

The final significant theme from student reflections on their progress over the semester was the benefit they found in the process. Michelle, a member of the group who created informational flyers about local foods in the cafeteria, discussed the value of simply trying:
I feel like I will be more likely to engage in social action plans after taking this course, because I have learned that through our own small group projects that a few people can actually make a difference...Maybe if you start something, you may not see the end of the project, but it is cool to know that you started [it]. I am more understanding of these issues now and people who support large ideas, because I realize that one person really can make a difference.

Michelle’s reflection is illustrative of what Qualley sees as a function of the critical composition classroom: a chance to try out “stranger experiences” (10). The product was not the focus of Michelle’s perceived growth. Instead, she realized that actively practicing an identity previously unfamiliar to her is where the project’s worth was. Also, as discussed in the previous chapter, students again commented on the process of being able to work with individuals in positions of authority within the institution. Josie wrote about the benefits of having a real audience to discuss her groups’ recycling map with:

The final project showed me how easy it was to get support from professionals. I was really impressed with how simple it was to get a meeting with the Iowa State web design staff and this really encouraged me to consider the staff as allies in future efforts that I would consider.

Josie’s experience with the project illustrates a common sentiment among students who valued process. This project opened up working relationships between students and campus staff, a prospect that had seemed inaccessible in the past. Josie’s use of the word “allies” also displays an extremely powerful realization. Not only does she realize that relationships with authority figures are realistic in this
setting, but she also sees a benefit in collaborating with the same figures who had
previously, in her perception, been functioning as the opposition. Much like
Giddens’s dialectic of control, Josie’s group took the agency the institutional
structure provided and from this position of authority, was able to work in concert
with the web design staff.

The end-of-semester reflections illustrate an obvious change in how the
majority of students perceived social action and perceived themselves likely to
continue that action. Some (like Laurel) went from admitting her shyness and
unwillingness to get involved in community problems to leading a group project
and valuing the potential that social action projects hold in local communities. To
synthesize what I learned over the course of this study, I will discuss my conclusions
in light of my research questions, restated below:

- What are possible ways to teach social action projects that can function as
  alternatives to service-learning and activist-based lessons?
- To what extent can place-based social action projects allow students to see
  themselves as capable of social action in the future?

To reiterate the motives behind the design of my semester, I was interested in
answering the need in public writing literature for more research on social action
assignments that allow students to create authentic, real-world actions, both
addressing problems in their local campus places or communities and displaying
consciousness of larger social problems (Bacon 1997, Bickford and Reynolds 2002,
Heilker 1997, Herzberg 1997). Though some (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, Schutz and Gere 1998) have written on these “activist” alternatives to service learning work, few have discussed these assignments within the context of a multimodal classroom. Also, something that my study practiced that had only been discussed theoretically was its use of a text to ease students into the idea of social action, rather than using a definitive textual “other” and asking students to come to terms with that inaccessible stranger. Finally, few studies have discussed a combination of social action education with a place focus, a marriage of perspectives that scholars such as Gruenewald (2003) and Ball and Lai (2006) see an immediate need for.

As the results display, the projects designed for this study provided students with opportunities unavailable to them in conventional writing classrooms. Early in the semester, students used blogging to publicly think through small, campus-based actions. Not only did the blog set the tone of public writing, it also allowed for a richer experience of peer feedback unavailable to students in a static writing classroom. Within this hypertextual environment, students were able to build an ever-changing knowledge base of social action ideas that ended up being directly transferrable to their final projects. Additionally, during the action projects, students found their audiences to be multiple and varied and realized that responding to these rhetorical situations in all four modes allowed them to better adapt their messages to audience needs. For example, Lindsey’s clothing swap project would not have been able to reach her intended audience as effectively if it had not utilized the power of Facebook, a social networking website popular among students. However, students may not have seen everyday websites as tools for social action
without a text that encouraged them to take realistic actions.

The Better World Handbook (and the related conversation with co-author Brett Johnson) was undeniably a motivating factor for student action. As was discussed at the beginning of Chapter Three, students like Kent had a difficult time seeing themselves as capable of action partly because of their unrealistic mental images of social action. This book opened the door that stood between students and social action. Though that door may have only opened only a crack for some students, they were at least able to peer through the opening and see the possibility of taking action in the communicative spaces of campus and the surrounding community. As was evident in some of the end-of-semester reflections, students were often apt to speak in absolutes about the experience: “I realized I’m capable of any social action” and “One person can make a difference if she just puts her mind to it.” While these reactions seem exaggerated and appear to be reinforcing conservative ideals of meritocracy that completely ignore the structural limitations on most individuals, I think that the reflections over the course of the semester tell a different story.

Many students at different reflection points discussed the barriers evident on a college campus that kept them from following through on their action plans. Even those whose physical projects remained on planning paper only still spoke at the end of the semester with a “language of possibility” and agentive optimism that wasn’t in reflections at the beginning (Giroux qtd in Fishman and McCarthy 342). As Jeff Smith (1994) argued, we need a “reframing of the issues that shows people the systems they’re enmeshed in and outlines the real choices available to them” (emphasis added, 210); it is only then when “people…will want to reassume their political role” (210). It may be that some students may still not fully understand the
systems they’re enmeshed in, but I would argue that many have at least taken that first crucial step towards reassuming a political role that was, in some, nonexistent. And if one of the goals of the course was for students to simply engage the experiential “other” of social action, the reflections demonstrate that the BWH was one of the factors that opened up an agentive space for some students to act in. To focus only on the worth of the BWH, however, would be an oversimplification of what allowed students to modestly shift their citizen identities towards action. The other significant piece of this puzzle was the focus on the place of the campus and the local community.

Bickford and Reynolds (2002) have argued about the importance of campus-based activist curricula stating, “Students do not need to leave the college or university to engage in acts of dissent” (243). Though students had the option to focus on problems in the Ames community outside of the campus, those who did go off-campus confined their action within the borders of Campustown (the student-centered commercial district of Ames) and often found their communication blurring between campus audiences and Campustown merchants. For those students who didn’t have a clear idea of the realities behind social action or those who saw it as something confined to large urban areas housing thousand-person protests, the place of the campus provided a setting where students could comfortably try out social action with an audience they knew in locations that were familiar. Some student groups also realized the benefits of recognizing positions of authority within the institutional structure, using those positions of authority from which to address their audiences. In these cases, I believe student agency can be attributable to the combination of multimodal communication skills, the BWH,
student ability to choose the direction of the projects, and the place of the campus. When the material conditions of their communication, their creation of realistic actions, and their positions as students intersected with the opening provided by willing campus staff, some student groups seemed to experience a temporary space of agency, as discussed by Herndl and Licona (2007).

And though I find the socially situated perspectives on agency (Cooper 2010; Geisler 2004; Giddens 1979; Herndl and Licona 2007, Miller 2007) to provide clear illustrations of how agents are formed and how change happens in the world, I find myself sharing the concern with C.M. Condit (in Geisler 2004) that students might still need to have an illusion of individual agency in order to feel like their work matters. However, I do believe that students need to know the realities they are up against.

**Transferability**

The foundation for my social action curriculum was provided by assignments specific to the ISUComm courses. Though the assignments (textual analysis, visual analysis, argumentation) are universal across many composition programs, the specifics of the multimodal lessons would be best reproduced within a composition program heavily focused on the interrelationship of written, oral, visual, and electronic communication. I recommend that class size stay relatively small in order to foster rich discussion between student groups and individuals during the planning stages of the action projects.

Another consideration of reproducing this project is the physical and social place of the campus. In my Iowa State University classroom, I was working
primarily with white students who had grown up in small, racially homogenous towns. The campus itself is located within a small Iowa city with the campus population providing the most racial diversity. The projects enacted in the social action semester would certainly take on a different shape in a culturally and racially heterogeneous campus community, especially if it is located within a larger urban setting.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Though this study did show success in moving students towards taking action within local communities, there are many possibilities for further study that arose within this process.

I asked students to work on their action projects in groups of four or five simply because 52 separate action projects would have been unmanageable. Also, many students had expressed comfort at the beginning of the semester in working toward civic action in group settings. However, additional research is needed to understand how social action projects are conceptualized and enacted by individual communicators. Does the perception of agency arrive differently with individual projects? To what extent does individual action work change the scope of the writing projects? Is there a difference in student-perceived critical thinking when action projects are enacted individually versus in groups?

Also, the design of these projects invite a multitude of questions regarding interdisciplinary partnerships, such as learning communities, that promote citizen action within a campus place. What local problems are departments already addressing? How could those projects be transformed into student-led partnerships
between two courses? Is it possible to revision service-learning within the context of social action projects, pairing student communicators with student engineers to provide communication “service” for student engineer-led actions?

Finally, the *Better World Handbook* provided a motivation for students that would have been difficult to replicate with only lectures and article discussions. What other texts can provide this accessible “other” of social action for student communicators? Are there any current rhetoric textbooks that do this within the context of composition lessons? If not, what would these books look like?

Because social problems are not going away and because composition studies is often needing to reinvent what we teach and what we talk about, a continued and exploratory focus on citizen action education with place-sustaining themes is necessary. Service-learning education continues to provide students with community literacy as well as real rhetorical situations that hold exigencies few textbook journaling assignments can stake claim to. However, for students to actually internalize their individual roles in addressing a problem, they need to feel a personal responsibility for the action or communication project being assigned. Students need to see their local communities not as locked realities but as changeable places that they can shape by utilizing their varied skills, harnessing their many passions, and recognizing the positions of action available to them. To restate the epigraph from the introductory chapter, “The task of developing a mode of citizenship education that speaks to this challenge appears awesome. But when one looks at the consequences of not meeting this challenge, there appears the possibility of a barbarism so dreadful that we can do nothing less than act as quickly
and thoughtfully as possible” (Giroux 359-60). The composition classroom is the ideal place to answer this call.
Appendix A

Beginning of Semester Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to get a sense of your understanding of the words “place,” “environment,” and “social action.”

1. In a few sentences for each term, please describe how you understand the following terms: “place,” “environment,” and “social action.”
2. Briefly describe how communication affects how we understand what a “place” and “environment” is.
3. In one or two paragraphs, please discuss to what extent you see yourself as someone capable of social action. To what extent does communication play a role in this?
Appendix B

The Better World Handbook blog entry guidelines
Fall 2009

To get us thinking about how the construction of places local to us are connected to broader social problems, we are going to be blogging once a week on one of the seven foundations of a better world from The Better World Handbook.

On the syllabus, I have assigned a blog entry about one of the seven foundations to be completed every Friday from weeks two to eight. For example, the first entry will be due on Friday, September 4th. Because we are discussing both the Social Justice and Economic Fairness entries that week, I am asking you to journal on both those foundations for the blog entry due on the 4th.

What your entry should include:
• A title – Use the following format: Week __ entry on ____foundation name
• A brief (four to five sentences minimum) summary of the foundation
• A few new ideas that surprised you
• A statement about where you see these problems evident on campus or in Ames
• An idea of a simple action on campus or in Ames that can address this foundation of a better world
• Label your blog “better world”

To help organize your Better World Handbook Entries on your blog and to help me find them easily, I’d like you to create a category on blogger to save them under. Here’s how to do this:

• Log-in to your Blogger account. Next to the title of your blog, you’ll find a link that says “Layout.” Click on “Layout”
• On the Layout Editor page, you’ll see a link that reads “Add Gadget.” Click on “Add Gadget.”
• On the list of Gadgets, there is a gadget named “Labels.” Click on “Labels” and save it to your blog.
• Any blog entries that you have labeled will now be filed under their specific categories on your Gadgets column. For example, all blogs labeled “better world” will be filed under the “better world” link.
Appendix C

Place-Based Action Proposal
(minimum 1000 words or 4 pages)
Fall 2009

Purpose of the Paper:

The purpose of this paper is to identify a topic/issue presented in the BWH and to propose a local action that could be taken in Ames or on campus to address or bring attention to that issue. You must be specific about the location on campus or in Ames where this action would “take place.”

The paper is persuasive in nature. This means that you are making an argument for a proposed action and discussing why that action would be beneficial in addressing or bringing attention to your problem.

A good persuasive paper does the following:

• Gives sufficient background on the issue
• Connects proposed action with larger social issue (a slow food meal as answering the issues of ecological sustainability and community)
• Establishes the writer as a credible voice on the topic
• Gives the reader a reason to read on
• Exhaustively presents the various opposing sides to the issue (in your case, this will be about whether a action should take place or not (for example, some people may oppose bringing local food into a campus cafeteria)
• Uses a variety of appeals to logos (empirical evidence, rational lines of thought), pathos (emotions, values of the audience)
• Moves a reader to acting on the proposed argument.

Action Guidelines:

Your proposed action should involve at least two of the four WOVE modes of communication (written, oral, visual and electronic), and should be something you are willing to do. Most importantly, the action should be appropriate for the location, audience, and context in which you would enact it (A food service director would probably react more positively to a civil letter and informative presentation than a protest.)
Remember, this is only one half of an assignment that is encouraging you to actually take action here on campus or in Ames. If you are basing your decision for an action on the categories presented in the BWH, try to pick a combination of a foundation and an action category that interests you. The more interest you have, the more successful this assignment will be.

You are essentially using this paper to make an argument to your classmates about what action you feel you and a group of peers could enact relatively easily and with good effect. Though I don’t want you to lose credibility by taking a casual tone, do as much as you can to interest your readers in your action proposal.

Possible action ideas:
These are only ideas. Use them as they are. Modify and use them. Or, don’t use them at all.

- Organize some kind of trash clean up. (the product might be a poster)
- Hold a slow food meal for a small group of people. (the product could be invitations, as well as informational cards about the food that go along with the meal)
- Invite a lecturer to campus. (the product could be the letter to the lecturer and a possible poster advertising the event)
- Give presentation about socially responsible investing to a business club. (presentation and possible handouts).
- Address the advertising of a bar downtown. (a letter and mock poster of an event you propose to bar owner)
- Find an organization that needs advertising created – create their posters.
- Make a video about your problem and publish it to a blog. Also, try to get ISU to start a webpage that publishes things like this. (the product would be a video and a letter to an ISU department)
- Create a poster to advocate for a cause (make sure it is relevant to the place where it would go up).
- Create a social event that pairs two unrelated campus groups together.
- Find an organization in town and create some kind of poster or other document for them.
- Anything else you can think of.

MLA and APA Styles:

Please use whatever style guide is appropriate for your discipline. We will cover citation in class, but I’m also asking you to refer to your BPH for any specific questions about citation.

Font: Times New Roman or Palatino

Spacing: Double-Spaced
Page Numbering: Contingent on chosen style

# of sources: At least five sources.

Limits on source types: No more that 50% of sources can be websites (does not include web versions of periodicals)

Evaluation Criteria:

You will want to demonstrate that you can employ the strategies and techniques we've talked about in the course. Some of them are listed below:

- a focused topic with a thesis
- relevant, concrete details that support your thesis
- a logical pattern of organization; transitions form one idea to the next that guide your reader through your material; unified
- includes local, and broader, systemic perspectives on topic
- paragraphs, language and tone adapted to your subject, purpose, and audience.
- a variety of sentence types (not short, choppy sentences)
- accurate, well-documented use of sources (including paraphrasing and quoting)
- few or no errors in correctness that distract the reader
- At least five sources
Appendix D

Place-Based Action Reflections
Fall 2009

Mid-Process Reflection:

1. Describe the extent to which this project has made you feel capable of action.
2. For you, what has been the most beneficial aspect of this project thus far?
3. To what extent do you see yourself doing projects like this outside a college course?
4. What have you learned about your local place by working on the research paper/project?

Final Reflection:

1. Describe two or three aspects of this project that were beneficial to your growth as a communicator.
2. In terms of accomplishing goals with this project, did being a student help or detract from carrying out all of your plans?
3. Has this project taught you anything about places being collections of conscious human decisions? If so, what? If not, what has it taught you?
4. How did group work affect your interest in the project?
5. In the following space, do the following:
   a. List which choice this group was for you (first, second, third, etc.):
   b. List out each group member’s name including your own
   c. Next to each person’s name, describe the responsibilities of that person and discuss his/her contribution to the group.
6. Give your project a realistic grade and explain why the planning and production of this project merits such a grade.
Appendix E

End-of-Semester Final Reflection (single spaced)
Fall 2009

Throughout this semester, we’ve done a lot of thinking about how our communication can shape the places around us in positive ways. We’ve seen how simple ideas from research projects can materialize into real action on our campus and in the Ames community.

For this end-of-semester reflection, I’d like you to combine these ideas of communication and social action and predict how those two ideas will be a part of your life in the future.

Part One

For the first part of the reflection, I’d like you to answer the following questions:

1. Describe what social action means to you.

2. After taking this course, will you be more or less likely to engage in social action efforts within your local places? Why is this the case?

Part Two

It’s ten years in the future and your time at Iowa State is now a shining memory in your past. You’re no longer a member of a campus community (unless you work at a school). You are now a member of a number of communities (work, neighborhood, small town, local organization, church, club sports team, etc.).

Write a narrative describing your life as it is now (in 2019) in one or a number of these communities. Is your communication being used for social action within this community? What is the project? How did you get involved? What strategies have you taken from your ENGL-250 class that you will use in this social action work?

If you don’t think you will be involved in these kinds of actions in the future, describe what your life will look like. What will you spend your time doing, at work and away from work?

Writing Tips:

• Pay attention to specifics and detail
• Set up the context so the reader has a good idea of the setting, the mood, and the purpose of your paper
• Use descriptive words to help the reader get a sense of the specific kind of action or place you’re involved in (I need more than simply “I did a food drive at the office.”)
• Be creative!
Works Cited


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