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The Risks of Engagement: Infrastructures of Place-Based Pedagogy in Urban Midwestern Contexts

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A.04: The Risks of Engagement: Infrastructures of Place-Based Pedagogy in Urban Midwestern Contexts

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Chair: Gesa E. Kirsch, *Bentley University, Waltham, MA*

Speakers: Elizabeth Rohan, *University of Michigan Dearborn*, *MI,* "America's Historical University Settlement Culture as a Blueprint for Contemporary Place-Based Pedagogy"
David Sheridan, *Michigan State University*, *East Lansing, MI,* "The Risks and Rewards of Storytelling in the Motor City"
John Monberg, *Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI*, "Risks and Rewards of Writing Civil Society"

I was drawn to panel A.04 because of my interests in place-based pedagogy. In fact, later that day I gave a presentation on a place-based approach to mobile composition, drawing examples from my teaching (C.05). One of the aspects of this panel that I found particularly engaging was the way that each presenter took a different approach to his or her attention to issues of place. The projects were quite diverse, but there were clearly overlapping connections in terms of how our local geographies, urban spaces, and communities have important implications for the teaching of writing and rhetoric. I walked away from the panel energized with a swirl of ideas for teaching and research.

Elizabeth Rohan, the first speaker, discussed findings from an archival research project in which she analyzed writing produced in the early 1930s by Northwestern University students from two sociology classes that engaged in a community partnership with the Northwestern Settlement House in Chicago. The goals of the community partnership in the '30s, noted Rohan, aligned with what we might call service learning today. As part of their course, students worked in the Settlement House and were reminded to not form unfair judgments about the people (primarily immigrants living in poverty) with whom they were working. According to Rohan, the university–community partnership was fairly short-lived, but she was able to access and analyze approximately 300 pages of student writing. Her paper focused primarily on examples from one student, Max, who took Sociology A and volunteered at the Northwestern Settlement House in the Fall and Winter of 1930–1931. Max's job at the Settlement House was to lead a boys club; this experience allowed him to study and observe immigrants within their own community. Rohan described how Max's writing demonstrated his reflections on his social standing, as well as how he questioned his values and assumptions. In analyzing Max's papers, Rohan noted a range of community-based experiences:

- how Max's interest in sociological observation developed, how visiting the Settlement House for the first time (in his words) "cast a great spell" over him;
- how he experienced heckling and snide comments about NU students on some visits;
- and how he decided to not make himself too important at the Settlement House because he knew he would be leaving at the end of the term.

He also experienced what Rohan identified as cognitive dissonance as he came to realize that he was not that different from the population with whom he worked, even though he came from a more privileged background. Rohan concluded by drawing connections between the partnership in the '30s and contemporary university–community partnerships today. She noted how her work suggests that the archives can be a rich source of insight into how students have historically used writing to make sense of the world around them.

The second speaker, David Sheridan, described a series of assignments he has taught in a unit on the City of Detroit within first-year composition courses. Sheridan explained how he teaches students to develop a "critical attitude" toward mainstream discourses and representations of Detroit through the study of signification practices and analysis of cultural artifacts. By showing examples of advertisements, news articles, and photographs, he demonstrated to attendees how he teaches students to critically analyze master narratives about the city. For example, he showed an advertisement for a bank, *Comerica*, which was founded in Detroit, with the headline—"Still here. Still Head-quartered here. And proud to be part of the spirit here." Sheridan argued that the advertisement relies on a master narrative of Detroit's history that is embedded in the minds of the magazine's—*HOUR Detroit*—local readership. He went on to explain how he invites students to critique master narratives of the city's history that he believes misrepresent the city today; this involves helping students critique the way mainstream sources often string together historical events (e.g., riots in 1967, White flight, collapse of the automobile industry, unemployment, drugs, gangs, violence, etc.) with causal implications. Sheridan also highlighted an example of how he prompts students to critique the way master narratives are reproduced and reinforced through visual rhetoric by analyzing photographs, such as a young White couple walking into a restaurant (which raises issues of gentrification) or images of large abandoned buildings (which suggest ruin and emptiness, despite a densely populated surrounding neighborhood not pictured). Drawing on the work of poets and photographers, Sheridan gave examples of how some writers provide alternative discourses or visual counter-rhetoric to combat mainstream discursive practices that misrepresent Detroit or to fill in missing pieces of history.

In the final presentation, John Monberg discussed a community partnership between two of his media studies classes and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum ☑ in East Lansing, Michigan. Because writing today is extremely collaborative and interdisciplinary, Monberg argued that writing constructs complex relationships often resulting in collective social media identities, which have cultural and political consequences. Providing background on the partnership, Monberg explained that his students worked to create a website and social media presence for the exhibit *East Lansing 2030: Collegeville Re-Envisioned* ☑ (*EL 2030*); the exhibit presented architects' and urban designers' contrasting visions of the future of East Lansing, considering factors like transportation, environment and green space, architectural design and other issues of place-making. Monberg designed the course so that students studied theories of identity, power,

and social reproduction; they also learned qualitative research methods and design thinking while developing prototypes. Some of the accomplishments Monberg identified from the course included students' experiences with fieldwork through interviews and their identification of four personas for major community segments (such as 20 and 30 somethings or the creative class). Students also generated and curated 379 photographs, 150 tagged themes (labels such as "green" or "sidewalks"), 8 videos translating design themes, and 85 webpages. Some of the pedagogical challenges Monberg discussed included coordination across social change, rhetorical theory, and design thinking; technical competency and support (they used Omeka ☑ to curate); and developing multiple iterations (students developed three, but Monberg suggested more would have strengthened the project). Monberg also identified some of the ways in which the project challenged students' understanding of civil society, such as complicating the divisions between Modernist visions of single-family homes and dense mixed-use of urban space. Moreover, students learned that translating technical information is complicated rhetorical work. Monberg concluded that the project prompted students to think about the social, civil, and political implications of community projects—how to not just disseminate information but to create an interactive space for local residents to reflect on their cultural values, as well as critique and transform public development projects.

Whether working with a historical time and place like the Northwestern University Settlement House, or contemporary urban places like Detroit or East Lansing, these presentations all underscored the significance of helping students develop a critical attention to place as part of our writing and rhetoric pedagogies. In each case, students were challenged to reimagine and reinvent what it means to be a member of a particular community, to more closely connect with their surrounding community, and to critically assess how others construct narratives about the places we live in and move through. In my own classes, I often use a mix of service-learning and community-based pedagogies that invite students to go public by engaging with places beyond the campus boundaries. As the projects on this panel underscore, this kind of pedagogical approach can be invaluable to student learning, transformation, and growth, while in some cases also providing services to improve our local communities. The presentations of Rohan, Sheridan, and Monberg encouraged me to continue with place-based pedagogical projects, but they also inspired me to explore and learn from the archives, teach students to critically analyze visual and textual cultural artifacts, and to experiment with digital projects that invite social action.