Lean On: Collaboration and Struggle in Writing and Editing

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> "I can no more think of giving up our writerly ways than I could of giving up breathing … or eating."
>
> —Andrea Lunsford to Lisa Ede, "Dear Lisa/Dear Andrea: On Friendship and Collaboration"

In January 2013, we published the edited collection *Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning and the University* (Lexington), a book that opens a needed conversation about failure, risk, and the complications of university/community writing partnerships. This isn't a negative book (we don't think so, anyway), but it is a gutsy one: our contributors explore their own best intentions as well as their greatest disappointments as community writing activists and scholars. Our project was the result of a three-year collaboration, one that began with an email and a request for feedback on an essay draft and has extended over more emails than either of us can count, many hours on the phone, and only a hard-to-believe handful of face-to-face meetings. Over time, we've come to know each other as collaborators and writers, but also as women, mothers, and friends. Perhaps most importantly, for our purposes here, our work has taught us how to be more effective collaborators and to value and understand the specific scholarly gifts (and challenges) of writing and thinking together. These lessons, we believe, have broader implications for how we understand university/community writing partnerships and our efforts as scholar practitioners.

We believe that our collaboration represents the kind of literacy sponsorship that Morris Young describes in his symposium essay, "Sponsoring Literacy Studies." Young argues that narratives of literacy can be understood in two ways: "'grand narratives' [that are] foundational to the field" and "'little narratives' [that create] personal touchstones" in our lives to inspire, support, or encourage us (10). Young argues that these "little narratives," these personal connections and strong friendships, give us the courage we need to develop meaningful research agendas:

> While we may consider our professional work as studying literacy and perhaps sponsoring

the further study of literacy through our research, we should also recognize that we are sponsoring literacy studies through the personal connections and relationships that develop in our curricular and extracurricular spaces and in the gestures that are often more than a simple act of acknowledgement or kindness. (14)

Our book project and our collaboration allow us to think through Young's argument about grand and little narratives. We interrogate the gold standard of long-term sustainability in university/community writing partnerships, arguing instead for an alternate "grand narrative," one which reassigns value to short term collaborations, to good ideas that perhaps yield small, if bright, rewards. Interestingly, in exploring the ebb and flow of our own collaboration—our "little narrative" over these last years— we have found a compromise of sorts, a version of "sustainability" that is at once "long-term" and also a series of starts and stops. Similar patterns are traceable in some of our contributors' stories in *Unsustainable*, suggesting that the work of collaboration is best understood, and practiced, as an exercise in possibility (if not always productivity), a combination of steps forward and backward. Our collaboration parallels, for us, the themes embedded in *Unsustainable*—risk, trust, partnership, complication—and, also at the core of all university/community writing partnerships, emphasizes the inseparability of work and home. As we read and think about Young's symposium essay, we find in both our own work as collaborators and in the collection, itself a synthesis of the professional/ public and the personal, an overlapping of "grand" and "little" narratives.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's recent reflections on their longstanding collaboration offer an insightful window into the everyday practices and conditions that undergird the creation of sustained and foundational work. Writing broadly about feminist theory and subjectivity, they explain:

> From a feminist vantage point, however, it is impossible to take the subjectivity of the rhetor for granted, impossible not to locate that subjectivity within the larger context of personal, social, economic, cultural, and ideological forces …. Feminist theory has consistently challenged any public/private distinction, arguing that knowledge based in the personal, in lived experience, be valued and accepted as important and significant. ("Border Crossings" 286)

We are most easily able to trace this collapsing of the public/private in our long and varied email threads over the years. Since the mid-1990s, scholarly examinations of email—its rhetorical potential and also its limitations—have helped to situate us intellectually within a medium we have long-adopted as a kind of second communicative skin. Certainly, much of our friendship and collaboration has unfolded on screen, email after email.[1] Consequently, we look with some envy (okay, a lot of envy) at Lunsford and Ede's description of their own experiences collapsing the professional and the personal, which they describe in "Collaboration and Compromise: The Fine Art of Writing with a Friend" as actually, really "being together" in the same workspace:

> One powerful impetus, and subsequent reinforcement, for our collaboration is our friendship. We enjoy being together, and even though we spend much of the brief periods

we're together—a weekend during the term, four to six days over Christmas, a luxurious two weeks in summer—working, we always find time for jokes, shopping sprees for exotic foods, and laughter-filled late-night dinners." (37)

These descriptions of working and playing together emphasize the very "personal touchstones" of which Young writes, particularly since these interactions are in fact supporting the production of texts that have informed the ongoing work of scholars in rhetoric and composition.

While we certainly have found joy in working together, we have typically had very little time to actually be together. Our route to friendship was far more circuitous and, since we met through email, any potential for deeper connection—for our own personal touchstones—had to happen in the sometimes-sterile space of an email message. However, as we review our extensive email dialogue, we are able to trace an unfolding easiness and play in our written conversations. It was actually grammar, Jess's (admitted) overuse of punctuation (!!?!!), her beloved dashes (—) that introduced Laurie to Jess's irreverent and wicked sense of humor. In essence, we established a kind of working chemistry through email correspondence, one that allowed for a friendship to grow, in writing, alongside our editing partnership.

There's an interesting parallel here, one which perhaps made the move into working together as editors and writers easier: since our most reliable source for "knowing" each other was email, there was perhaps less transition to make as we moved from one writing activity to another. This is particularly interesting to consider in light of Young's emphasis on the interwoven relationship between theories of literacy and the many narratives that inspire these broader concepts. Young warns us that "grand conclusions about the consequences and power of literacy [can] become more significant than understanding actual practices" (12). We still cannot quite believe that we have only met in person a handful of times, and we certainly took an enormous risk by uniting our publishing agendas when both us of were facing the tenure/promotion hurdle. However, in many ways, our emails took on a life of their own and, at least in the first year of our work on *Unsustainable*, comprised the bulk of our writing to and for each other, especially while we edited. Our relationship was at the center of these writing practices, and how we read and responded to emails has come to represent some of the underlying themes and issues embedded in the project itself. As we read over this correspondence, we find the threads of hope, inspiration, and support that we offered each other. Here is one email from Jess to Laurie in late 2010:

> Hey—
> I have lots to write on all this--so I'm just writing you to tell you that I will write you—if that makes sense ... prob sometime tomorrow night or Tues—! Anyway—glad you're on board-—and we'll talk logistics-—tenure and all-—more soon,
> J (Restaino, 10 Oct. 2010)

This email is about writing, making plans to write, a very loose timeline (read: flexible), logistics,

tenure, and more. At once, it says everything and nothing, but at the heart, Jess is sending out encouragement and carving out the next, tenuous step in our long climb together. When our lives felt most chaotic, it was so important to pave the way for the next tiny step in the process, and we began to trust each other, to believe in our improbable partnership, so much that these emails were enough to prod us past the latest disappointment or insurmountable challenge. Dashes and ellipses here play a subtle, though powerful, role in communicating continuation, an encouraging incompleteness, an affirmation that we are not done. Jess makes a commitment here that there is more to come.

In "After Tactics, What Comes Next?", published in *Unsustainable*, Paula Mathieu reflects on the end of her partnership with Boston's street newspaper, *Spare Change*, and her reaction to an email sent by the board president expressing regret about her decision to leave the board. She writes:

> At that time, the balance of new motherhood and academic work seemed all I could manage, so I didn't respond. Frankly, I didn't know what to say or how to feel. Now, with my daughter starting preschool and me reflecting on my street-paper work through this writing, I decided to email back, apologetically and tentatively, thanking him for the email and saying hello. That started a conversation via email about me possibly getting involved with the organization again. (30)

What's so notable here for us is not the simple fact of a shared medium, but rather that email serves that familiar function of tentative link, a glimmering "maybe" in the digital universe. It's not a meeting—though it could lead to one; it's not a formal piece of academic writing—though certainly it could promise that an attachment is soon to follow; it's surely not bold like a phone call—though it could open a dialogue ultimately too busy and bantering for typing fingers alone. In Mathieu's case, a meeting would follow after email laid a reassuring foundation. This reassurance is built on personal connection, the "touchstones" or little narratives about which Young writes, and makes possible further, perhaps "grander" collaboration. In our work throughout *Unsustainable* (and still, as we've worked on this piece), we have used email to offer such continuous reassurance, especially when the work was not yet done, when one of us was still toiling, in process. Email has become a way of charting our own incremental course. The ebb and flow of community writing work discussed in our book often follows a similar trajectory, marked by starts and stops that are navigated through mutual assurances, the sewing together of many little narratives.

WHAT WE BECAME:
A COLLABORATION THAT HELD US TOGETHER

In his "Afterword" to our collection, Eli Goldblatt reflects on the nature of compassion, particularly as it is bound up in a certain acceptance of failure. When we act based "on the needs of the other," we do not do so only when success is guaranteed (Goldblatt 264). In fact, we typically can't know the outcome of even our best-intended actions: which will yield positive results, which

might uncover new obstacles or serve to reroute our original goals. Goldblatt writes, "Nothing we do is permanent. Setbacks and disappointments can sustain us as much as achievements if we manage to hear compassion's necessary music" (266). Being responsive to our potential collaborators, either as writers, editors, or community activists, requires personal connection and receptivity. This surely necessitates the kind of authentic listening that Linda Flower describes so eloquently, that we might understand the needs for flexibility when the realities of the non-profit world meet the realities of the academic world.[2] Here again we see a necessary overlapping of the personal and the professional, creating, for Young, "a complex web of relationships that may sustain literate action" (10).

Our own relationship strengthened with each communication, even when our interaction didn't yield immediate reward. As we began to trust each other, to know that each would—eventually—come through if she said she would (however many "I'm-writing-to-say-I'll-write" emails in between actual drafts), we entered into a kind of "seesaw" effect where, following the writing/editing "turn taking" with our book project, our frustrations and focus and confidence seemed, too, to alternate. Just as one hit a low point, the other seemed to produce and pick up the pace; as one lost confidence, the other had a burst of it and some to share. In the same way we began to trust that we could, together, produce *physical* texts via collaborative writing and editing, so too did we each begin to trust in the other for delivery of the psyche, as well. Because our collaboration on *Unsustainable* extended for three years, there was plenty of doubt and frustration on our journey. Interestingly, the possibility of starts and stops is also reflected in contributors' stories in our collection, drawing a compelling parallel between our work of co-editing and the dynamics of university/community writing partnerships. As Mathieu writes:

> Committing oneself to starting a project also means inevitably facing an ending, sometimes a painful one. Tactical work requires—or at least signs us up for—a continual act of reinvention, of starting from scratch, going back to square one and having the courage to face the possibility of work not happening, but hoping and working so it will. And sometimes things come full circle. (18)

This notion of coming "full circle," particularly as the prospect of failure looms, takes shape in our email exchanges and carries at once the prospect of professional growth and personal vulnerability. Often, one of us faltered as the other rallied. Here, Jess writes upon hearing from Laurie just as her personal life—the morning rush, children, a mischievous cat—collides with her professional responsibilities:

> Hey L-
>
> It's so helpful to work in pairs, I have to say....because I showed up to work today ready to cancel my classes, take the bus into the city, and roam around Manhattan aimlessly.... one of those days (the morning started with the cat peeing on Abby's backpack; naturally I discovered this just as I was shoving her lunch in it, moments before it was time to leave).... and, anyway, here you are...picking me up! Thanks! (Restaino, 27 Oct. 2010)

These were the scrappy moments—the moments when all seemed lost and the tenuous thread holding us to the daily routine, the teaching, mothering, writing—it all threatened to snap—when we opened an email, and were reminded that the process had value and was worth the struggle. Even the most ridiculous writing/teaching/parenting moments could provide, if not joy, at least some humor, and with the humor, the energy, and wherewithal, to go forward. Here is an email from Laurie to Jess just as we were close to securing a publisher for the book, expressing hope amidst chaos:

> So exciting! I'm thrilled, and excited, and glad—what a way to make my day! It sounds like you are as crazy as me. I took Cody to a birthday party, so proud to have a present all wrapped, and find the restaurant OK, and then we see another kid, with his mom, IN COSTUME. Because I forgot that it was a costume party. So Cody freaks out, and says he won't go. So I promise to find him a costume on the street we are walking down toward the restaurant, and I see a fabric store, and plead with the owner to help. We find some pirate fabric to make a cape and an eye patch, and he LOVED it. Geesh. Really, though, so excited about the press. I feel silly that I haven't yet contacted XXX Press, but it looks like XXXX might be a good fit. Yahoo! Laurie. (Cella, 7 Dec. 2010)

On our own, these struggles felt both trivial and tremendous; parenting young children requires stamina, endless energy, and a durable sense of humor. The chance to share, to encourage and to laugh with each other made our work together not a chore, or another item on the "To Do" list, but rather a true pleasure and relief, a wellspring of encouragement during a particularly intense period of writing, teaching, mothering and then, writing again. In many ways we found that our work was happening while we were moving through our daily lives in ways that naturally moved us to share both, our thinking about work and our moments of in-between, the circumstances and tasks which either interrupted our writing and editing work, or which sometimes served as an unlikely conduit for an idea. These "zig zag" patterns between the personal and the professional are captured in an email flurry from Jess, infant by her side, one Saturday early in the project:

9:00 AM:
> Thalia literally just bit my leg while I'm typing this. Guess I've ignored her enough—keep me posted on all—!
> > J (Restaino, 6 Nov. 2010)

Later that day, 3:00 pm:
> Just a quick follow up—I'm wondering if one of the XXXX Press series might be a good match for our book? (Restaino 6 Nov. 2010)

Whether we were drafting out proposals, editing the contributors' essays, or drafting our own essays, we knew that time was short, that responding via email would be quick, efficient, and even give us

a brief moment to vent about the bites, scrapes, snack requests, and hugs that fill our days. In this email, Jess brainstormed about the editing process until time ran short—but that didn't mean she stopped thinking as she ran errands later that afternoon. In between sports practices and dinner, she had a second to throw out one more idea, one more way to move the project forward. In essence, our collaboration was able to yield a longer project perhaps because it was not defined by professional boundaries alone. To move forward together at that moment, we needed to weave together our sometimes competing personal and professional realities.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE "LITTLE NARRATIVES" IN OUR LIVES

Our collaboration as writers and editors has taught us to embrace an uncertain kind of progress, one that starts and stops, races and slows, in ways that mirror the rhythm of university/community partnerships. In reflecting on Morris Young's symposium essay, we see our own experience as inseparable from both "big" and "little" narratives. We have reached some overarching conclusions in our work together about community writing and the partnerships that surround it. But these larger arguments have been made possible, held up, really, by our personal touchstones, the small building blocks of our working relationship that continue to create space in which we can think together. Our work to publish *Unsustainable: Re-imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning, and the University* remains—in both the tumult of the effort itself and the messages in the book's pages—a tremendous source of instruction in embracing non-linearity, and the many small stories that have allowed for our very own grand narrative.

As more writers and scholars move forward on the publishing trajectory made possible by those like Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, a variety of both practical and theoretical implications for collaborative work take shape. Our work together has been enlivened by our friendship, as our friendship has been enriched by our collaborative play—and so we have some hands-on advice for those whose professional lives are shaped by the need to publish academic work. When we embark on a collaborative project, the first practical difference is that the writing process will move at a dramatically slower pace, and so first time collaborators will need to create a flexible understanding of deadlines and stopping points in order to limit frustration and disappointment. Before embarking on a collaborative project, writers who have tight professional deadlines need to recognize the risk involved and make peace with an adjusted timeline. While at first this new flexibility might seem fraught with risk and uncertainty, in fact, this type of flexibility allows for increased creativity and insight.

Moving past the risk associated with an adjusted timeline, we believe that many writers are still afraid to work collaboratively because they are afraid to lose their own voice in their work. On the contrary, we have found that the chemistry of a good professional friendship can become the bedrock of a fabulous article. Our work together has shown us that chemistry—at the heart of any

strong friendship—can bring true imaginative play into the writing process. It requires some risk, some waiting, some willingness to reshape what might have felt done, but we have the advantage of our words being reflected back as us with clearer meaning, revised by someone who can and does sometimes finish our sentences. Our editing and our writing has been enriched by the play and even the joy of our late night phone calls, the laughter that comes with sharing parenting trials, administrative woes, and family vacations. Our commitment to each other—to support each other despite (and because of) our messy cars and messier lives—echoes Lunsford and Ede's emphasis on the joy that comes from being together. That joy informs their written work, as it informs ours, and continues to deepen our understanding and respect for each other, and the work we create together.

The last practical implication that comes of working collaboratively is perhaps the most valuable for those still facing the challenge of finding a permanent position or facing the tenure and promotion hurdle. Finding the time to research and write about meaningful projects can feel almost impossible, especially when balancing a heavy teaching load and/or the many chaotic (and lovely) demands of parenting. Working collaboratively can provide desperate writers with the support and encouragement they need when all feels lost. Just as creative inspiration ebbs and flows in a single writer, the stamina needed for a large project, like the one we faced as co-editors of a book, can be generated together, and shared as each writer faces the demands of her individual life. When Jess felt lost, Laurie sent a revised text, words of encouragement, and joy over the news of a publishing contract. Likewise, when Laurie was at a low, Jess sent her the encouragement she needed to face the next step in the writing process. Collaborative relationships have the power to sustain us in the face of a truly anxiety-inducing job market and tenure process. As writers, we must have the courage to build on our personal and professional connections so that we can better face the demands of our writing lives.

These practical suggestions have as their roots the theoretical implications at the core of *Unsustainable.* As our contributors show through their own little narratives, the big story is about embracing non-linearity and unpredictability in our work as scholars and practitioners working to build new and sometimes non-traditional connections between university and community. Accordingly, we have a responsibility to pose questions for which we sometimes do not have immediate answers, and to adjust these questions and our expectations as we feel shifts in the needs and goals of our partners. We might ask: In what ways does a longer-than-planned gap in the completion of a community-based project offer opportunities to re-see our original goals? How does our understanding of the "problems" faced by a community organization change when we engage in such re-seeing? To what extent does time thus serve us as scholars who might have the opportunity to watch a community partner's needs take new shape, shifting as influences and critical factors come and go? What are the potential benefits of intellectual and practical openness to more flexible timelines in our own writing as scholars of community literacy? Perhaps most importantly, how might we reassess and reimagine all those particular projects that end abruptly, seemingly unfinished, a disappointment on the surface of our original vision? The contributors

to *Unsustainable* offer numerous angles from which to approach these questions, emphasizing the need for variability in our work both inside and outside university walls. Our field needs to continue to share these stories and to celebrate the ways in which their unevenness might contribute to how we think about our scholarly/community work. We look forward to hearing from others whose textured stories of unpredictability allow for revision and innovation in our scholarship and our practice.

NOTES

[1] For a fuller discussion of email as a rhetorical, communicative mode, see especially Scott, Longo, and Wills; as well as work by Ishii on satisfaction with email communication across workplace environments and tasks.

[2] See especially Flower's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement.*

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